

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO SUFFERING:
FINDING CLARITY IN THE MIDST

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
DEDICATION.....	viii
ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
ABBREVIATIONS	x
EPIGRAPH.....	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1. MINISTRY FOCUS	5
Introduction.....	5
My Story	5
Problem Statement.....	14
Regional Characteristics	22
Conclusion	25
2. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	26
Introduction.....	26
Old Testament Foundation: Psalm 23.....	27

	New Testament Foundation: First Peter 1:3-9	46
	Conclusion	64
3.	HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS	66
	Introduction.....	66
	Jim Elliott.....	67
	Pete Fleming	70
	Ed McCully	72
	Nate Saint.....	74
	Roger Youderian.....	77
	The Auca Tribe	80
	Reaching the Aucas.....	81
	Conclusion	87
4.	THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	88
	Introduction.....	88
	What is Suffering?	89
	Abrahamic Religions: Judaism and Islam.....	94
	Indian Religions: Hinduism and Buddhism.....	97
	Chinese Religions: Taoism and Confucianism.....	104
	Conclusion	107
5.	THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS	109
	Introduction.....	109
	Theodicy: God and Human Suffering.....	110
	Suffering Caused by God: Perfect Plan Theodicy	116

	Suffering Caused by Satan: Warfare Theodicy	127
	Suffering Caused by Sin: Free Will Theodicy	131
	Suffering Caused by Nature: Genesis 3 Theodicy	135
	Hope during Suffering	137
	Conclusion	139
6.	PROJECT ANALYSIS	141
	Introduction.....	141
	Project Description.....	141
	Analysis: In-Depth Interviews	149
	Analysis: Concept Paper	155
	Conclusion	166
APPENDIX		
A.	CONCEPT PAPER ON THE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING.....	168
B.	SURVEY INSTRUMENT	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY		185

ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO SUFFERING: FINDING CLARITY IN THE MIDST

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This project explores theological and practical aspects of understanding and responding to suffering, particularly in, but not limited to, a missionary context. Activities included: (a) conducting in-depth interviews with missionaries about their experiences, practices insights and the wisdom they have gleaned, and (b) collecting feedback from non-missionaries on a concept paper about the theology of suffering and the responsibility of God vis-à-vis the believer. Posturing one's heart to preserve clarity, confidence and hope in God's nature, practicing unwavering obedience, maintaining a cognizance of eternity and discerning one's personal response to trials helps one to find joy and hope during suffering.

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DEDICATION

Jesus, You've remained so faithful in seasons when I have not been so. Your goodness shines in even the darkest situations. May your Name be lifted high on the earth as it is in heaven!

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

Table 1. List of Missionaries Interviewed	145
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Figures

Figure 1. Sex ratio among respondents	156
Figure 2. Age distribution among respondents	157
Figure 3. Denominational affiliation among respondents.....	158
Figure 4. Respondents with previous contemplation of suffering	159
Figure 5. Agreement with the framework.....	160
Figure 6. Attitudes regarding whether it is useful to think about suffering.....	162
Figure 7. Attitudes regarding whether the framework will be helpful	164

ABBREVIATIONS

MAF	Mission Aviation Fellowship
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

This is what the Lord says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’

—Jeremiah 6:16, NIV

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is an experience common to the heart of mankind, and throughout history it has served as a fulcrum causing multitudes to either seek or reject God. This phenomenological research study was designed to explore the dynamics of suffering; particularly the way one's theological and conceptual framework for understanding suffering affects both the experience of it and the corresponding response. The focus of this project was on missionaries in particular, though it is not limited only to those with this calling. Of particular interest was the issue of how one can understand and respond to suffering in an emotionally and spiritually healthy way. Finding clarity in times of suffering is dependent upon understanding both who God is and what one's response should be. This document describes the project itself, as well as the biblical, historical, theoretical and theological foundations that inform the topic.

Chapter One, Ministry Focus, describes how the spiritual journey of the researcher relates to the research topic, and describes the unique challenges faced by missionaries as they respond to the call of God and serve in sometimes challenging environments. As God turns His heart to the broken, so too do many of His people who are called to the unreached, the poor and the lost. Those who respond to the call encounter suffering in a unique way, both within their own lives as well as in those they serve. Missionaries who have left their place of origin and traveled to a new, often unfamiliar, place can be especially prone to carrying the burdens of human suffering.

Chapter Two, Biblical Foundations, provides an exegetical analysis for a key Old Testament passage and New Testament pericope that relate to the subject of suffering. The passages were chosen not necessarily due to their emphasis on suffering, as there are many to be found in Scripture, but due to their emphasis on finding hope and joy in times of suffering. In other words, these passages provide insight into what a believer sets their mind to, hopes in, and meditates on during difficult times in order to retain clarity in their understanding of God and hope in His goodness and faithfulness. The Old Testament passage, Psalm 23,¹ provides simple words and imagery that have helped both Christians and Jews alike to find hope and trust in God's provision during difficult times and continue to do so today. The New Testament foundation, 1 Peter 1:3-9, focuses not only on the value and experience of suffering, but also describes what a believer hopes in during times of tribulation. Viewing suffering through the lens of one's eternal inheritance, the hope of future glory and the fruit that trials produce in refining one's faith, encourages the Christian believer, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to rejoice in their suffering.

Chapter Three, the Historical Foundations, describes an event in history that beautifully exemplifies the way God works through suffering and sacrifice that it serves as an inspiration for all those who hear it. Jim Elliot and his four friends gave up their lives in martyrdom as they demonstrated God's love to the Auca people, a violent tribe living in the jungles of Ecuador. It was this very act of obedience in suffering that would turn the hearts of one of the most feared tribes in the nation toward the peace and love of Jesus Christ. This paper describes the story of the men's martyrdom and the Auca

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible.

conversion, as well as the motivation and mindsets of each of the men as they set out.

They were regular Christians, not saints or superstars, and they represented a wide range of personalities, dispositions and struggles. It was not their personal achievements, but their posture of obedience for anything to which the Lord may call them which bore eternal fruit and changed the destiny of the Auca tribe for eternity. The story of their sacrifice and God's faithfulness gives others the boldness to step out into what God is calling them to and helps them to recognize the ways that God is speaking to them and working in and through their lives.

Chapter Four, the Theoretical Foundations, defines suffering and describes how other religions deal with this issue on a conceptual and practical basis. Suffering is a subjective phenomenon which depends on the perceptions and personality of the individual. Yet the inherency of suffering to the human condition makes it a fundamental concept for most religious traditions. This chapter focuses on the way six major world religions deal with suffering: the Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam), the Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), and the Chinese religions (Taoism and Confucianism). None of these religions provide a sufficient answer to the problem of suffering; it is only through the blood atonement of Christ that it makes sense.

Chapter Five, the Theological Foundations, lays the framework for how theologians throughout history have approached the issue of suffering. It is organized around the four identified sources of suffering: God, Satan, Sin, and Genesis 3. Various theodicies, or explanations of God in the presence of evil and suffering, are discussed as they relate to the four sources. While each theodicy may fall short in providing a

complete framework for every circumstance, when taken together in a theology of diversity they provide a more holistic understanding of human suffering.

Finally, Chapter Six provides a description of the project and an analysis of the results. The project was composed of three main activities: in-depth interviews with missionaries, a survey in response to a concept paper on the theology of suffering, and structured journaling by the researcher. For this project, the research methods and project activities were closely intertwined and in some cases one and the same. The in-depth interviews were designed to glean wisdom and insight from seasoned missionaries about how one can understand and respond in a healthy way to various forms of suffering. The survey tested a theological framework, written by the researcher in the form of a concept paper, which describes how one can respond to suffering through identifying its source.

While the intended target audience for this project is other missionaries who may be either new or struggling, suffering is a phenomenon that touches the life of every person regardless of calling or location. Thus, it is hoped the results of this project will be applicable in any context where a believer may find themselves to be challenged by the goodness of God and unsure about how to move forward in a difficult situation.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

Everyone experiences suffering in one form or another, though missionaries tend to be exposed to this phenomenon in a unique way. The desire to focus this dissertation on finding clarity in suffering arose from the confusion I experienced in my own life regarding God's nature, particularly His goodness and role in suffering. Through working in international relief and development, I interacted with many missionaries and was exposed to the particular challenges they face. The rates of missionary burnout are high, and it could be partly due to the way that they understand suffering, both practically and theologically. The ministry focus of this project is on missionaries specifically, though it is hoped that the principles and truths unearthed through the research will be helpful for anyone who may have wondered about this topic.

My Story

In the early 80s, my parents were spiritual seekers and met each other at a New Age group following a guru named Hilda. When I was born, they brought me to Hilda for help in finding a name for me, and all she could say was, "I see blue, do with that what you will." I have often wondered what she must have meant –a blue aura, perhaps?– but

after six weeks of searching for a name that meant blue, my parents settled on Azure. The color azure is a sky blue and it now, to me, means clarity and revelation.

I grew up in a small city in the lower Hudson Valley called Newburgh, NY. Urban decline hit this once model city very hard and it is now a place of contrasts, caught in a collision between big-city problems and small town America. There were no New Age groups in Newburgh and, being open to anything spiritual, my parents found a small Christian church to attend. Even still, it was not until I was thirteen that they truly came to know the Lord. The difference I saw in my parents' behavior convinced me of His reality, and I cannot remember a time when I really questioned whether God is real after that. Knowing His nature, however, was a different story.

At the age of sixteen, an encounter with a girl at the doctor's office became a turning point in my spiritual development. She was my age, but after talking with her for a short time I could tell that in some intangible way she was not like me at all. Her maturity and solidness of soul –for lack of a better way of describing it– seemed well beyond her years. What made her different? Later I found out she had survived childhood cancer and I began to think that hardship produces growth. Around the same time I befriended Kate and Kelly, twin girls that had been born with epidermylosis bullosa, a very painful and debilitating skin condition. Yet the freedom in their laughter and the beautiful joy that welled up from deep within their soul significantly impacted everyone who had the privilege of meeting them. I became convinced during that time that suffering in some way produces a depth and joy that was unlike what most “normal” people experience. I prayed that God would grow me like a runner training with weights, who is that much faster when race day comes and the weights are removed.

There is a saying, “be careful about what you pray.” When I was seventeen, I was diagnosed with a rare birth defect, the nature of which will remain private for the purposes of this paper. It was a difficult diagnosis to handle, as every young girl has certain dreams about her future. This brought with it questions of identity, but the Lord prepared me for this time by that prayer I had made the year prior. This was a chance to put my desire into practice and develop the strength I had seen in Kate, Kelly and the girl at the doctor’s office. It is funny how someone can impact your life so deeply without even knowing their name. At the time I never felt angry at God but tried to use the new challenge as an opportunity for growth. I underwent a surgery in an attempt to correct the condition, but it was only semi-successful and I had to wear a medical contraption to maintain the results of the surgery. It was uncomfortable and at times painful, but I do believe that God used that time of suffering to grow me and make me into a better person.

During my junior year of college, I became close friends with two Pentecostal international students. They both had a spirituality that was new to me and they experienced God in a way that seemed so personal, exotic and full of faith. We attended an on-campus bible study group together and one Sunday the Lord put it on both of their hearts, separately, to pray for my healing. That night we had an intense time of prayer and worship which was unlike anything I had experienced to that point, and, believing that healing was linked to acts of faith, I threw the post-surgical device into the dumpster. It smashed upon impact. There was no going back.

After that night, my body was different and real results of the healing were evident. My feeling was, “Lord, would you really be so good as to make me normal?” I was so overjoyed, full of faith and excited about what God had done that I practically

danced down the hallways, appreciating the ability to move around free from constraints and rejoicing in what a healing would mean for my future. However, by the end of the school year, the Pentecostal bible study group began to exhibit unhealthy attributes. It was becoming spiritually abusive and I left the group some months later.

Around the same time, I noticed the healing was reversing and I was so confused. While I had no anger at God during the initial diagnosis, an intense anger now arose within me. “No, He would not be so good as to make me normal,” I thought. Why would He trick me like that, raising my hopes for healing and a normal life only to dash them? I became convinced that God’s idea of good was so vastly different from mine that it could not be fully understood. Somehow, as if in some abstract cosmic math, He was probably good, but for me in the real world, I did not get it. One day during senior year I remember standing in my kitchen, picturing His face right in front of me and bitterly crying out to Him, “I don’t know who You are anymore and I don’t trust You. I’ll serve you but I don’t love you.” I am not sure why I remained a Christian other than my conviction that God was real, though it would be eight years before I could read the New Testament again. In a way, the God of the Old Testament seemed more familiar to me.

During this time, after graduate school, I moved to Baltimore, MD. Baltimore is such a unique city, where quirkiness and absurdity are celebrated and people wear brokenness on their sleeve like a badge of honor. It was a place where deep conversations with neighbors on the street felt normal. Life was so busy during that time that I forgot my personal struggles with the Lord. I worked at a Christian humanitarian aid organization, supporting programs in East Africa and traveling back and forth, mostly to

Darfur, Sudan. Outside of work I attended a Baptist church where the congregation actively worked to address issues of urban poverty in Baltimore city.

We had a beautiful Christian community in Baltimore. An idealistic group of us moved into a rough neighborhood and tried our best to live out what our church called “Intentional Living,” which was essentially an urban missional lifestyle. Yet as time went on, I was becoming increasingly depressed and burdened. Whereas the time of difficulty experienced in my teenage years brought greater strength and resilience, the various troubles I was experiencing in my twenties was making me weaker, angrier and I was becoming someone whom I did not recognize. I did not have a good tangible answer for where God was in the suffering of those I was trying to serve, and I could not tell them with any sort of conviction that God was good for them, right now, in their circumstances. My gospel was powerless and I was seemingly being confronted by that fact daily. Trying to help people does not work without the active work of the Holy Spirit.

Yet God was calling me back into a deeper relationship with Him far before I realized it. During one of my trips to Darfur, I contracted typhoid and quite likely would have died if it were not for the prayers of my charismatic coworker named Stephen. As I began to wave in and out of consciousness, we could not find adequate medical care in the remote Sudanese desert and did not know at the time that it was something as serious as typhoid. With full faith and confidence in God’s ability to heal, he prayed for me. Having only taken some aspirin, I recovered and the only explanation is that his prayer worked. He began to talk with me about spiritual warfare and the prophetic. While I was becoming increasingly desperate for something that I knew I did not have, at the time I was not yet ready to open that door again.

Disillusionment and exhaustion continued to set in. I was physically and emotionally weary, and disappointed in the lack of results we were seeing both internationally and locally. One night about a year later, lying in my little basement bedroom, I asked the Holy Spirit to come into my heart again. I did not realize He left until He flooded me with a sense of peace and fullness that I had long since forgotten. That night a profound shift occurred in my life and I have never been the same. I began reading the New Testament again and embarked on a journey of rediscovering God that has completely changed the course of my life.

What began with asking the Holy Spirit back into my heart about five years ago has become a journey of learning to hear His voice and obey. I left my job at the aid organization and moved back home to Newburgh; a decision that did not make a lot of sense to me or my friends at the time but I was stepping out into the unknown waters of obedience. One week after I returned, God's presence began to fall during some meetings at my home church, and what was supposed to be eight days turned into three months of nightly meetings where we encountered the Holy Spirit in a tangible way. It was a summer of revival and I am so grateful God brought me home to be there for it. In fact if it were not for those meetings to help me make the initial transition to New York, I probably would have turned right back around and moved back to Baltimore.

That summer initiated a process of deep healing and a paradigm shift that was so significant that at times, especially in the beginning, I wondered if this was how Neo must have felt upon waking up in the Matrix movie. I had been a Christian but many aspects of the charismatic paradigm were completely foreign to me. It scared me a little bit –was this a cult?– but the freedom I was experiencing was so tangible and so unlike

anything I had ever seen before that I was compelled to continue moving forward. After years of battling anxiety and employing various coping mechanisms, little by little I was finding that there was nothing left that needed coping. I cannot explain it, and do not know how or when it left, but all I know is that the more I continue to spend time in God's presence, the less I even think about the anxiety that used to dictate my lifestyle.

My life then almost became a grand experiment of hearing God's voice and following, rather than doing what made sense to me, or those around me for that matter. At first my obedience was coming purely from blind faith and not from a confidence that following His voice would be good for me. I battled with thoughts that as I continued to step out in faith, perhaps I was repeatedly making the same foolish mistake in a vain attempt to find a God that was more tangible for me than what I had known before. Maybe I was throwing all of my chips on the table for a losing hand and was messing my life up. Or, maybe I was just like the heroin addict who sacrifices everything else in her life just to get that next fix; except for me that fix was God's presence. I would freak out when it seemed that a step of obedience was not working out, or when I thought I heard God but no doors would open in that direction. There were times during this season when I still felt like everything I gave to God dried up and died.

God bless my parents for being so understanding during this process. After the summer of revival, I ended up living with them in Newburgh for four years and fought every minute of it. Compared to the full life I had in Baltimore, it was a season of isolation, waiting, angst and seeming purposelessness. Yet what I did not realize then was that God, in His mercy, was allowing me to grow, explore and make mistakes in an environment where I did not have the eyes of misunderstanding onlookers to discourage

me. It was also a time of deep inner healing and restoration for my soul. He was building a history with me to grow my confidence in Him. Slowly, piece by piece, after seeing how those same steps of obedience that originally caused me to freak out would now actually work out, I was learning who He was and that I could trust Him. He is always working and He is good in so many ways that I never even noticed or realized before. I am even coming to a place of trust that He will work in the physical condition that is still present after my reversed healing in college.

At the time of choosing suffering as the topic to explore for this thesis, I had no idea how big this issue was for me or how confused I was about it. Throughout my 20s I had mentors with a strong theology of suffering, believing God intends it so that we share in the suffering of Christ and become more like Him. “Just remain open handed before the Lord,” they would advise, “we are meant to die.” This advice made sense to me and I tried my best to follow it. Yet over the years I seemed to be growing less like Christ and angrier at God, rather than more joyful and confident in His goodness. When was it going to start working? As I began to encounter God’s love and learn more about His nature, this theology was directly challenged. Yet it seemed instead that in charismatic circles, sometimes things that were merely dislikeable were bound and cast out, which surely will not produce Christ-likeness. As I walked into that new paradigm during those years in Newburgh, I was so confused about how to respond as difficulties arose and could not find a satisfying answer for what I was supposed to do. I went there in obedience to God, does that mean I was supposed to embrace this as something He was doing? Or was it the enemy trying to thwart God’s plan in my life? Did I do something wrong?

My heart in writing this dissertation is not to focus on suffering. Any suffering that could be experienced in this life vastly pales in comparison to the everlasting joy and beautiful ways that God is working within us, through us and around us at every moment of every day, if only we let Him show us what He is doing. Yet trials, troubles and difficulties will always be a reality while we walk this earth, and those who answer the call to learn God's heart for the poor, broken and oppressed will be especially confronted with this issue. We need to be clear about who our God is, how we can relate to Him, where we find our joy, and what we are hoping for during times or seasons that challenge our perception of His goodness.

Over the years I have had the opportunity to serve alongside missionaries in various countries, as my experience in international development overlapped with the work of missionaries. In college I spent a summer living and working with missionaries in Jamaica, and it was there that my desire to work overseas was birthed. As an internship for graduate school, God opened the doors for me to spend a summer in Ecuador helping a mission agency with their clean water program. More recently, I joined a public health team working with missionaries in Mozambique to develop a program for pastors to be trained as community health workers. Many of my friends are missionaries, or missionaries' kids. There have been times when I have been utterly amazed at how God has allowed me to meet and sit down with beautiful saints in remote places around the world even when I am traveling for a secular job; missionaries who are dedicating their entire lives to the Lord and doing phenomenal work that the world may never know about, even though heaven, I am convinced, rejoices over them. Through these experiences I have developed a heart for their unique challenges. While it is hoped that the results of

this project will be helpful for anyone who has pondered the question of where God is in suffering and how we can walk through life and finish well, my primary target population is missionaries, as they are on the front lines and deserve special care in this area.

Problem Statement: Missionaries and Suffering

Missionary care is underfunded and underemphasized, and burnout among missionaries is very common. When underlying emotions and theological questions are left unaddressed after repeatedly experiencing and walking alongside those experiencing suffering, those who began with a vigor and excitement to share the Gospel at any cost may find themselves paying such costs and returning from the mission field broken, depressed, and sometimes even struggling with the core of their faith. It is far too common for a previously energetic, hardworking and sacrificing person to come home confused, jaded and depressed.

In 2003, the World Evangelical Alliance produced a report on missionary retention and found that over a 10 year period, 43% leave the mission field indefinitely (37.5% among denominational based agencies and 48% among nondenominational agencies). Of those, 20% left denominational agencies and 60% left nondenominational agencies for reasons that were potentially preventable.¹ Though theology was not included as a variable in the study, it is quite possible that the way a missionary understands who, and where, God is during times of suffering greatly impacts their

¹ Jonathan Lewis, et al, "US Report of Findings on Missionary Retention," World Evangelical Alliance, December 2003, accessed online December 7, 2016 at http://www.worldevangelicals.org/resources/rfiles/res3_95_link_1292358708.pdf.

ability to confront challenges in a spiritually and emotionally healthy way and remain in the field for the long run.

What is a Missionary?

Most Christians today are familiar with the concept of missions, yet it is still difficult to define. The word missionary comes from the Latin *mitto*, which means “to send.”² Sometimes it involves traveling to distant nations, while other times it may be as simple as driving across town. The duration may vary greatly as well; in recent years, with cheaper air fares and increasing globalization, there has been a growing cadre of short term missionaries. As they fulfill the call of the Great Commission and bring the name of Jesus into the far reaches of the earth, missionaries serve around the world in every context imaginable. Some serve in areas that are urban and developed, while others are found in rural areas so far from civilization that reaching out to the people groups involves joining a remote tribe. Some are transient; others are settled for life in their new adopted home. Yet there are some core characteristics that define a missionary and their goal.

Today, the church is increasingly realizing that every Christian is a missionary regardless of whether God has placed them vocationally in a church context or in the marketplace. As followers of Jesus, the call of every believer is to bring the will and kingdom of God to a fallen earth and each one has a unique role as a member of the global body of Christ. There are no limitations placed on time or context and it can be done whenever a believer encounters another human.

² J. Herbert Kane, *Understanding Christian Missions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990) 29, 27.

Yet there are unique characteristics and challenges facing those who have left their place of origin and traveled to a new, often unfamiliar, place with the primary goal of spreading the Gospel. Due to differences in the level of sacrifice, privation, focus and sometimes dedication, Herbert Kane distinguishes between the Christian *witness*, which describes the mission of all believers, and those who are called to be a full time *missionary*.³ Furthermore, the emphasis of a particular mission can vary depending on one's denomination or predominant theological framework, such as a primary focus on bringing the message of the Great Commission, the Old or New Testaments, the theological concepts of salvation in the book of Romans, or the eschatology of Revelation. These frameworks may cause a missionary to spend more or less time emphasizing a particular topical area such as: the establishment of social justice; the cross-cultural communication of the gospel message; the fulfillment of the Great Commission; the proclamation of the glory of God in a particular context; and the establishment of the kingdom of God from a Trinitarian perspective.⁴ Certainly an individual's purpose can encompass more than one of these at the same time.

In this sense, while it is impossible to develop a working definition that covers every conceivable mission scenario, Kane defines a missionary as someone who has “been called by God to a full-time ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4), and who [has] crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries (Acts 22:21) to preach the gospel in those areas of the world where Jesus Christ is largely, if not entirely, unknown (Romans

³ Kane, *Understanding*, 28.

⁴ Gerald D. Wright. “The Purpose of Missions,” *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*. Ed. by John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith and Justice Anderson (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 18-19.

15:20).”⁵ For practical purposes, this description is sufficiently both broad and specific to provide a working definition. It provides a usable framework for the decision regarding respondents to include in the dissertation fieldwork.

Accordingly, someone who travels to a foreign country for a few weeks and does not remain connected to the people there is not necessarily considered to be a missionary. Short mission trips may have some impact for the Kingdom by planting seeds in someone’s heart and preparing them for long term missions; yet embarking even on a series of mission trips is not devoting one’s life to serving as a missionary. Yet neither does missionary work have to entail the dedication of one’s entire life to a single location. Hale defines short term missions as three months to three years.⁶ While the depth of integration into the host culture is more limited for short term missionaries, they nonetheless play an essential role in missionary work. They usually bring special skills, such as medical, public health, engineering or pedagogical expertise. They also bring fresh excitement and ideas in support of the long term vision. When returning home, they bring that excitement with them to their home churches and can provide new avenues for financial and prayer support for the long term missionaries. Many times these types of missionaries serve as bridges for long term missionaries, bringing news of the latest developments in the body of Christ and connecting them with the global body of Christ. These traveling missionaries can be especially helpful for those living in remote areas, far from a local church. Sometimes these traveling missionaries can serve in an apostolic role, bringing encouragement, insight, leadership, intercession and spiritual discernment.

⁵ Kane, *Understanding*, 28.

⁶ Thomas Hale, Jr, *On Being a Missionary* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995) 22.

Following in the next aspect of Kane's definition, while it is key for missionaries to do humanitarian work and serve not only spiritual needs but the deeply interrelated physical needs of those they serve, those that seek to reach only physical or economic needs are not considered to be missionaries, even if someone has devoted their life to it. Humanitarian aid workers who may live overseas but focus more on physical or economic needs, and do not devote their lives to also ministering the Word and prayer, are likewise not considered to be missionaries per se. They may even be a Christian themselves but for the purposes of this paper it is considered to be a work of compassion and mercy but not necessarily missions.

Furthermore, the concept of crossing geographical or cultural boundaries may be vague but is a key in that it does not always involve the crossing of geographical country lines. Those who permanently relocate from suburban areas to the inner city, with the goal of church planting and reaching the urban poor, can certainly be considered missionaries. The heart and vision of someone who would choose to live that lifestyle is very much missional in nature and the learning curve of acculturation can sometimes be as steep as any inter-continental move.

Finally, a missionary preaches the gospel in areas of the world with a significant population of people who do not know Jesus. This may or may not correlate with socioeconomic class or access to economic resources. It can no longer be assumed that missionaries originate in developed nations and travel to poorer countries. As of the mid-1990s, more evangelical Christians live in the majority world than in the richer nations and almost every country on earth sends out missionaries.⁷ Indeed missionaries

⁷ Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, 1.

sometimes leave less developed countries and travel to countries that may be economically rich but spiritually poor. The suffering they experience may not be the physical privation of the traditional missionary, yet it is no less real.

Challenges and Burnout

Both spiritually and physically, missionaries are challenged in unique ways and the fight for emotional and spiritual health can be both invigorating and taxing. Whether growing or waning, most missionaries do not remain stagnant in their spiritual life. While difficulties are experienced differently depending on perception, temperament and past experience, Hale defines the challenges of mission life as: loneliness, loss of privacy, high workload, lack of facilities, financial worries, unmet expectations, cross-cultural stress, interpersonal conflict, health problems, family-related anxiety (particularly because most missionary children attend boarding school) and pressure to perform. Sin can result when stress is experienced for a long period, such as when anger turns to resentment or fear turns to anxiety and unbelief. Hale sees the antidote to stress not as the strengthening of self, as is promoted by psychology, but the denying of self and clothing oneself with Christ.⁸ Yet to do so one must be clear about who Christ is; while unconscious misperceptions about God may not have a significant effect on a believer who is living a comfortable lifestyle, for some missionaries it may mean the difference between thriving and struggling in the field. As one puts on Christ, it is imperative to understand and fully appreciate Christ's nature in all His fullness of grace, mercy, peace, compassion, justice, holiness, righteousness, joy and love.

⁸ Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, 301-302.

While the suffering of people groups served by missionaries may sometimes be overemphasized in the sending culture,⁹ it is nonetheless true that missionaries regularly encounter suffering, even if it is marginalized groups from among an otherwise stable population. The heart of the missionary is called to the broken and the unreached, causing them to seek out the broken and the unreached no matter where they are serving.

Burnout is very common among missionaries. In 2012 the Mayo Clinic put together some statistics on burnout in overseas workers and they defined burnout as “what happens to an electric motor when it runs too long at too high a speed.” It consists of a mixture of the following symptoms: (a) negativity/cynicism, (b) loss of enthusiasm, (c) decreased emotional investment, (d) fatigue and irritability, (e) sarcastic humor, (f) withdrawal from co-workers, (g) increased rigidity, (h) feelings of isolation and lack of support, (i) easily frustrated, (j) increased sadness, (k) physical ailments/somatization, (l) anhedonia or lack of ability to feel pleasure, (m) projection/blaming others, (n) inappropriate guilt, (o) “just hanging on” until home assignment, and (p) a sense of emptiness and depletion.¹⁰

⁹ Portraying people from developing countries as destitute and helpless has become quite an effective way to raise money and increase one’s financial support base, yet it deeply hurts both the mission and those they serve. Using images or stories that uses someone in their vulnerability in order to make money for a mission is both exploitative and hurtful. Unfortunately it has become so common that a name has been coined to describe this type of exploitation: Poverty Porn. It does not promote their dignity or treat them with respect as being created in the image of God. It also creates barriers and misunderstandings between people of different cultures. For example, it has become somewhat popular belief among developed nations, particularly the United States, that all Africans are poor and that they live in huts with flies on their faces and dirty water, which is an untrue and unfair depiction. Finally, while suffering can be a characteristic of missions, these portrayals cause people to disproportionately associate missions with suffering. For additional information on the effects of Poverty Porn, please see: “5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person | ONE,” accessed online October 5, 2015 at <http://www.one.org/us/2014/04/09/5-reasons-poverty-porn-empowers-the-wrong-person/>.

¹⁰ J.W. Richardson, “Burnout in Overseas Workers: Understanding and Managing Stress and Depression,” Powerpoint given at the Mayo Clinic, November 8, 2012, accessed online January 11, 2016 at <https://www.medicalmissions.com/learn/resources/burnout-in-overseas-workers>.

This dynamic is understood to be a temporary preservation phenomenon, as the one suffering must retreat for a while and recharge before returning to service.

Unfortunately sometimes, when these underlying emotions are left unaddressed, it can take its toll and cause burnout. Disappointment after disappointment can take its toll and wear down even the strongest soul. Poverty, death and crisis may tear away at their sense of hope as they share in and bear the burdens of suffering peoples.

Yet there are some missionaries who have served for decades and retain their softness of heart and hope in the Lord's goodness. This is not because some people are better or more successful than others, but could be due to certain spiritual and mental health behaviors, such as boundary setting, that protects the missionary from burnout. Hale does not believe in burnout as a normal course for a missionary. He sees it as the result of something gone wrong, whether it is spiritual, emotional or physical. Sometimes it can be the result of an imbalanced motive, such as spiritual pride or perfectionism driving the person to push themselves too hard. In a context with such great need, it can be difficult to say no or to draw the necessary boundaries around one's personal life or free time. Hale believes that a life in balance should never result in burnout. However, he is careful to define balance as the dedication of all twenty four hours of every day to God, as the Lord is not a tyrant and will not let His people go beyond the abilities He's given them. God will direct when to rest and when to work, and will provide supernatural endurance for assignments to which He has called someone.¹¹

¹¹ Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, 310-312.

Regional Characteristics

Missionaries interviewed during this project have served in a variety of contexts around the world. The culture and characteristics of each region provide unique opportunities and challenges. Below is a description of the unique nature of each region: Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Sub-Saharan Africa

The growth of Christianity has experienced much success in Africa. Pew Research shows that in 1910, less than 2% of Africans identified themselves as Christian. In 2010 the number was up to 24% and it is expected to reach almost 40% by 2050.¹² J. Herbert Kane identifies a number of reasons for this, including: the huge number of missionaries that have visited Africa; the destabilization of tribal power during the colonial era, which allowed missionaries to emerge as leaders; the high regard for missionaries, which was a fortunate result of the sad reality that for whatever reason tribal groups believed that the white man was superior; the huge emphasis that missionaries to Africa placed on education, which allowed them to reach children at an age when they are open to new ideas; and finally, Africa did not have well established preexisting religious paradigms, as animism lends more to syncretism than opposition to Christianity. Furthermore, most Africans believed in a Great Spirit and a supernatural realm, which paved the way for Christianity.¹³

¹² David Masci, "Christianity Poised to Continue its Shift from Europe to Africa," Pew Research Center, April 7, 2015, accessed online January 12, 2016 at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/07/christianity-is-poised-to-continue-its-southward-march/>.

¹³ Kane, *Understanding*, 219-221.

Asia

Asia has not experienced the same boom in conversion to Christianity as has Africa and Latin America. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are deeply embedded into the Asian culture, depending on the respective location, which has led to a low rate of conversion. Kane attributes this to: the deep pride and long history of their culture, leading to a resistance to change; the close association between Christianity and colonialism; and the exclusivity of Christianity, while most eastern religions are more tolerant of spiritual pluralism.¹⁴

There are also fundamental differences between the eastern and western world view which makes the acceptance of Christianity difficult. The Indian concept of reincarnation, which shows up in Hinduism and Buddhism, where good and bad behavior is rewarded or punished in one's current or future lives, is a stark contrast to the concept of grace, salvation and eternity in heaven. Some sects within both Hinduism and Buddhism have no concept of deity or saviors at all and instead believe in the natural order of the universe which doles out punishment and reward as natural consequences. Others may have one or many gods, but even in these cases the gods are more similar to patron saints rather than sovereign deities with a divine will that is to be obeyed. Later forms of Buddhism saw achieving deity as the ultimate goal of enlightenment, which again contrasts the concept of worshipping an omnipotent God. Finally, Confucianism also teaches that human nature is essentially good, which stands in opposition to the concept of sinfulness.

¹⁴ Kane, *Understanding*, 199-203.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean is a cultural mix of ethnicities and religions. Roman Catholic missionaries reached Latin America and the Caribbean during the early 1500's while the Protestants did not arrive until mid-1800. As a result, until 1960 it was estimated that 90% of Latin Americans were Christian, but even then most of them were nominal, with only 10% practicing regularly.¹⁵ Today, Pew Research shows that this number is dropping, as only 69% of adults currently identify as Catholic. While some have left Christianity, many have become Protestant: while 9% said they grew up Catholic, almost 20% now identify themselves as such. The study also showed that Pentecostalism is on the rise as across all of the nineteen countries, more than half (or even up to 72% in Brazil and Colombia) of the Protestants said they had witnessed a divine healing and more than three fourths said they occasionally witness a charismatic practice such as praying in tongues or prophesying (reaching even over 90% in Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, Colombia, Brazil, Paraguay, Honduras and Dominican Republic). This number was lower among the Catholics, but still roughly half of the Catholics in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Guatemala reported that they had witnessed or experienced a divine healing and between 20-75% said that they occasionally witnessed charismatic practices.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kane, *Understanding*, 225-227.

¹⁶ James Bell and Neha Sahgal, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2014, accessed online January 12, 2016 at [http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+pewresearch%2Fall+\(PewResearch.org+%7C+All+Feeds\)](http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+pewresearch%2Fall+(PewResearch.org+%7C+All+Feeds)).

Conclusion

Missionaries inherently seek out the lost and the broken, and in doing so they are exposed to human suffering in a unique way. While the particular challenges they face are uncommon among the general population, anyone who has struggled with the issue of suffering may be able to relate, in some way, to these same questions. Though this project will focus on missionaries specifically, and explore how those who are doing well have understood and responded to suffering, the results will hopefully be encouraging not only for new or struggling missionaries, but to the general population as well.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

God's people are no stranger to hard times and the Bible has much to say about suffering throughout the Old and New Testament. Many of the psalms articulate feelings of abandonment, confusion and despair. Yet there is one psalm in particular that God's people have turned to throughout history to remember His goodness in times of difficulty: Psalm 23. The profound simplicity of its words and imagery have helped both Christians and Jews alike to find trust in God's provision and it continues to do so today.

In the New Testament, among many passages that discuss suffering, 1 Peter 1:3-9 focuses on *hope* in suffering. Edmund Heibert beautifully describes this excerpt as "the outpouring of an adoring heart. Only one who has devoutly contemplated the greatness of our salvation could utter such a magnificent paeon of praise, one that prepares and encourages the suffering soul to steadfastly continue the spiritual battle. It transmutes present sufferings and turns them into abiding heavenly treasures."¹ When viewing suffering through the lens of one's eternal inheritance, the hope of future glory and the fruit that trials produce in refining one's faith allow believers, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to rejoice in their suffering. Below is an exegetical analysis for both of these passages, including its application for the Christian life today.

¹ Heibert, D. Edmund, *1 Peter*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 55.

Old Testament Foundation: Psalm 23, The Lord is My Shepherd

Context

The book of Psalms is written as a collection of prayer or songs to God and they have brought joy and consolation to God's people throughout history, both ancient and contemporary. In this compilation of poetry expressing thanksgiving, lament, song, wisdom, liturgy and prophecy is language that beautifully describes the many facets of God's character and the nuanced layers of a believer's relationship with Him. It captures the various seasons of a believer's life, providing heartfelt expression of joy, trust, confusion and anger, and provides an example for the reader as to how to relate to God in the midst of these different seasons.

Jewish scholars refer to the Psalms as the *Tehillim*, which means "praises." The Christian use of the name Psalms derived from the Greek title *Psalmoi*, which was used in the Septuagint. Both the Hebrew and Greek words refer to making music with instruments.² The book is divided into five sections which, according to an ancient Jewish commentary called the Midrash, represented the five books of the Law. Its organization probably reflects the way the psalms were used in the cultic rituals of ancient Jewish worship: the close correlation between the first four books of the Law and the first four divisions of the Psalms indicates that they were probably read concurrently in the Palestinian Jewish custom of reading through the Pentateuch over a period of three years.³

² W. Ralph Thompson, "Psalms 1-72," *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Charles W. Carter (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 181.

³ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1963), 492.

Yet the current organization of the Psalms is also most likely the result of a long period during which various smaller collections were combined and reorganized. This is evidenced in the apparent portions of repetition Psalm 14 is equivalent to Psalm 53; Psalm 14:13-17 to Psalm 70; Psalm 57:7-11 and 60:5-12 to Psalm 108. Furthermore, some Psalms, but not all, were revised to use the name Elohim instead of Yahweh which most likely hints that they were slightly adapted as they were used by different groups, for different purposes, at different times.⁴

The inclusion of the Psalms among the inspired Scripture also indicates that the church regards them to be not only the writers' words to God, but also God's word to mankind.⁵ By extension, then, not only do the Psalms express the writer's sentiments to and about God, but it also contains the promises of God as well as an indication that God Himself understands the heights and depths of the human experience as expressed in the Psalms and can relate to suffering.

It is quite appropriate that Psalm 23 follows Psalm 22, and the liturgical use of the Psalms suggests that this ordering was intentional. Psalm 22 is one of the most heartfelt expressions of pain and confusion found in the entire Bible. In fact, Christ Himself used this Psalm to describe His pain on the cross as he bore the sins of mankind:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
And by night, but find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)

Yet directly following the tumult and writhing that was expressed in Psalm 22 comes Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The beauty and simplicity

⁴ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1962), 99.

⁵ J. Clinton McCann, "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 642.

of these words calm the internal storm by reminding the reader that God's nature remains true, much like God silenced Job by reminding him of His vastness and majesty. Even though it may feel so sometimes, God's people are not forsaken and Psalm 23 is a reminder that He cares intimately for His children's every need much like a shepherd cares for his flock. Thompson notes that interestingly it is the suffering experienced by Christ, causing him to relate to Psalm 22 and cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which is the very thing that allows believers to be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."⁶ God Himself reached into the depths of humanity so that He could lift us out of the pit of despair. In dark nights when the words of Psalm 22 become the cry of one's heart, comfort can be found in Psalm 23's expression of trust and provision.

Authorship of Psalm 23

Many psalms include what is called a *colophon* at the beginning of the passage, which was common scribal practice indicating an author, musical notation or purpose of the psalm. Throughout much of history, because seventy three of the Psalms have a *colophon* that attributes authorship to David, readers have considered David to be the author of the entire book. Psalm 23 identifies itself as "a psalm of David." However, critical scholarship began to emerge in the nineteenth century and along with it came questions about the collection's authorship. Variations were noted between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint in the content and placement of *colophons*. Critical scholars question whether this attribution means that David was actually the writer, or if it was

⁶ Thompson, *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, 228.

added later in his honor. When it says that a particular Psalm is “of David,” they note that preposition *le*, meaning “of,” could also be translated as “concerning,” “associated with” or “dedicated to.”⁷ Sarna believes that the *colophons* indicated the way a psalm was used in cultic traditions and that the variations between versions of the ancient text indicated the different uses among guilds or families.⁸

Early scholars during this critical period believed that the Psalms arose from situations experienced by various individuals over a longer period of history; this was called the personal/historical method. A next move of scholarship in approaching the Psalms was form criticism, which emphasized the liturgical nature of the writings. Begun by Hermann Gunkel, form critics sought to categorize the genre or form of a psalm and interpret it by identifying its place in the worship rituals of ancient Israel or Judah. Form critics had various ways that they would divide the psalms based on content, mood or type, and often they would identify between ten and thirteen classifications. Over the last 50 years, a rhetorical criticism approach introduced by James Muilenburg has enriched the study of the Psalms by analyzing its literary features, inviting readers into an appreciation of its poetic nature.⁹ Yet while they question the identity of the writers, scholars agree that the Psalms were most likely written originally as devotional literature by individuals and later incorporated into the cultic or liturgical practices of ancient and modern Jews as well as Christians. This would hold true whether or not it was written by David.

⁷ William A. VanGemen, “Psalms,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 34.

⁸ VanGemen, *Expositor’s*, 19-20.

⁹ McCann, *New Interpreter’s*, 641-644, 651-652.

The Talmud, which is a record of rabbinic teachings that span from the first century through the seventh C.E., states that “David wrote the book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah.”¹⁰ This tradition holds that David wrote the psalms that are attributed to him and was the one to compile the works of other authors for the ones not attributed to him.

Variations in the *colophon* may have developed later depending on its particular use in cultic practices or on the spread of the manuscripts. The New Testament writers, when referencing the Psalms, also assumed that David was the writer. Luke 20:42 even states it directly: “For David himself says in the book of Psalms.” 2 Samuel 23:1 also speaks of David’s poetic abilities and underscores this with repetition: “Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse declares, the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel.” If ancient writers of the inspired Scripture, along with Jewish scholars and scribes who were committed to the painstakingly accurate recording of religious documents, believed that it was written by David, it is difficult to support a recent academic argument based on circumstantial evidence. Critical scholars can provide no proof that psalms attributed to David were not actually written by him and the stronger weight of evidence suggests that he was indeed the author. In the case of Psalm 23, David would have been intimately familiar with shepherding, making it a very appropriate metaphor for him to use.

¹⁰ Nancy Declaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaneelTanner, “The Book of Psalms,” *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 9.

Scholars who question the Psalms' authorship find it difficult to place the precise date or even period in which the psalms were written, due to the standalone nature of the poems and their subsequent revisions as the cultic traditions evolved. However, they do believe the verses were most likely written in Israel's pre-exilic period, which spanned from 1400 to 587 BCE, as they contain some archaic language and lack any reference to the post-exilic conditions or ritual laws. Furthermore, the psalms of the Qumran sect and the Psalms of Solomon, which are both non-canonical books that have been dated to the later Maccabean period, distinctly differ from the book of Psalms.¹¹ For scholars who believe David wrote and/or compiled the verses contained in the book of Psalms, at least in their original form, the process of dating the book is simple and precise, as it can be placed in the eleventh century BCE when King David lived.

Use and Structure

Despite its popularity and simplicity, Psalm 23 has posed some challenges for interpreters in identifying its original social or cultic setting. Form critics identify it as a psalm of confidence and trust, which is a derivative of a lament psalm,¹² for it is in times of lament that trust is most needed. In the face of pain and confusion, psalms of confidence assert faith in God's goodness and protection despite circumstances that may elicit fear of abandonment or demise. McCann observes that despite the fact that this psalm is commonly read at funerals to console the body of Christ in times of death, the imagery and consolation is no less profound for those of us who are still living. It is a

¹¹ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 92.

¹² VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 18, 214.

radical affirmation of faith that God will provide for one's needs and security, which may even sound naïve in contrast with a culture that encourages trust in oneself for security.¹³

Most commentators divide this psalm into two segments depending on the imagery used to describe God and His role: verses 1 through 4 describe the Lord as shepherd, and verses 5 and 6 describe the Lord as host. Craigie sees a more subtle difference between the two segments, moving from the divine shepherd image to the anticipation of future thanksgiving in God's house.¹⁴ Yet it is the position of this paper that the poignant shift in this psalm is not in the imagery used to describe God's role or in the field to table metaphors, but instead between the layers of iteration regarding the sureness of the Lord's provision. In that light, this psalm would have three segments: (a) verses 1 through 3 describe the provision and protection of God; (b) verses 4 and 5 reaffirm that God's provision and protection is still true even when our lives appear to be threatened and cast in the shadow of deepest darkness; and (c) verse 6 reemphasizes that indeed God's care is even eternal in nature.

Psalms 23:1, The Lord is My Shepherd and I Shall Not Want

Psalms 23:1 begins by asserting that, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In this passage, the name of the Lord used by the psalmist is YHWH or Jehovah. The particular variation of the spelling refers to Jehovah "the existing One" which emphasizes

¹³ McCann, *New Interpreter's*, 767, 769.

¹⁴ Peter C. Craigie, "Psalms 1-50," *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 19, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 205.

the eternal and self-existent nature of God.¹⁵ By using this particular name for God, the psalmist begins by foreshadowing God's eternality which transcends death and provides hope for those who hope in Him.

Thus this opening sentence affirms that the eternal God is shepherd. Ancient Israel had the tendency to approach God in a collective and ritualistic manner –as the people of God observing the law– but this psalm brought God down to the individual level. In this psalm, God is not only a shepherd, He is *my* shepherd.¹⁶ Literally a shepherd refers to one who tends or pastures a flock. This Hebrew word could also be used to refer to a companion or one who keeps company with another.¹⁷ God is a caring companion and keeps close company to His people, and as such can be analogized to a shepherd that cares for his flock of sheep. It was also common in the ancient world to apply the shepherd metaphor to kings, as the imagery evokes sentiments of caring, provision and protection.¹⁸ Therefore professing God as a shepherd not only denotes caring but also serves as a declaration of loyalty to God as King.¹⁹

In the gospel of John, Jesus uses this same metaphor to describe himself as God. In calling himself the good shepherd, he provided more detail on the characteristics associated with this role:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away - and the wolf snatches them and

¹⁵ James Strong, “#h 3068, Y^ehōvâh,” *A Concise Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible, with their Renderings in the Authorized English Version*, (Hendersonville, TN: Mendenhall Sales, 1970), 47.

¹⁶ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 215.

¹⁷ Strong, “#h 7462, râ'âh,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 109.

¹⁸ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 215.

¹⁹ McCann, *New Interpreter's*, 767.

scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:7-15)

The verse continues on to assert that because God is shepherd, His flock shall not want. The word used for “want” is *châçêr*, which means “to lack, to be without, to fail, to have a need, to be made lower or to decrease.”²⁰ In other words, because the eternal God cares for his children, they will never be in need and never be decreased. While it is not quite a literal antonym, the word *châçêr* in many ways is the opposite of *shalom*, which means completeness and encompasses the concepts of soundness, welfare, safety, wellness, happiness, friendship, prosperity and peace.²¹ By extension then, if trusting God will allow one not to *châçêr*, or not to lack, this passage affirms that the Good Shepherd will keep them in *shalom* and wholeness.

Psalm 23:2, Green Pastures and Still Waters

Psalm 23:2 continues on to say that, “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” The Hebrew word used for lie down is *râbats*, which literally means to crouch with four legs folded, like an animal that lies itself down.²² An animal that lies with its legs folded is not in a defensive position and cannot quickly run away from a predator. It has to rely on something outside of itself –in this case the Shepherd– for protection. Sometimes this comes in the form of actual antagonism; other times as situations that are so overwhelming that there is no other choice but to trust God for provision. This illustration is appropriate for the vulnerable human condition, as it is

²⁰ Strong, “#h 2637, châçêr,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 41.

²¹ Strong, “#h 7965, shâlôwm,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 116.

²² Strong, “#h 7257, râbats,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 106.

impossible for anyone to truly protect themselves and one must fully rely on the provision and protection of God.

Furthermore, not only does God invite His people to recline, He actively invites them to lie down. The word “to make,” or *sûwm* in Hebrew, means “to put.”²³ This word is used in Scripture in various forms and contexts but in this case, the translation “put” is appropriate: God puts his sheep in green pastures where they can lie down, free from fear of demise or *châçêr*. It is not of their doing or their own strength. Here it is possible to rest and eat, and trust Him to protect one’s safety while enjoying His provision as a sheep that lies down in a field of green grass. The sheep do not have to strategize or find the pastures on their own; He will put them there and guide them as a shepherd.

The word used for “pasture” in this passage, *nâ’âh*, can also be used to describe a pleasant home or habitation²⁴ and calling it green literally means that this pasture is full of grass. For sheep, which eat plants for sustenance, green grass can mean the difference between a full stomach and starvation. Readers living in ancient Israel, where dry areas can receive as little as two inches of rain per year,²⁵ would not take green grass for granted. Thus God is exhorting believers to live or find their home in a place of provision and peace that accompanies a sufficiency of food.

Continuing in the passage, in the same way that God puts his sheep in green pastures, He also leads them beside still waters. The Hebrew word for “lead” is *nâhal* and is an active word like *sûwm*. It means “to conduct or lead with care, particularly to a

²³ Strong, “#h 7760, *sûwm*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 113.

²⁴ Strong, “#h 4999, *nâ’âh*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 75.

²⁵ “Canaan and Ancient Israel: Climate and Fauna.” The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Copyright 1999. accessed online June 15, 2015 at <http://www.penn.museum/sites/Canaan/Climate%26Fauna.html>.

watering station or a place of rest and refreshing.”²⁶ However this word implies a leading through carrying. When one is famished and has no ability to muster the energy to find water, God promises that He will carry them to the still waters. Some translations also say “waters of rest.”

Taken literally, pasture and waters could apply to actual food and drink. Psalm 37:25 says that “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.” McCann believes that this psalm’s symbolism is not primarily conveying that God will grant his children peace, even though He does this too, but that He will literally provide for their needs and keep them alive. Green pastures means food, still waters means drink, and right paths (seen in verse 3) mean that shelter is found and danger is avoided.²⁷ Jesus affirmed this as well during the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . Therefore do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ . . . Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:25-33)

In the gospel of John, Jesus told the woman at the well that “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Thus in both a

²⁶ Strong, “#h 5095, nâhal,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 76.

²⁷ McCann, *New Interpreter’s*, 767-768.

literal and spiritual sense, God promises to sustain His people and allow them to rest in their trust of His provision.

Psalm 23:3, A Restored Soul and Right Path

Psalm 23:3 continues, “He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” After asserting that God will provide for His people’s needs as a shepherd leads his sheep to food and water, the psalmist continues to encourage that He restores their soul. The word for “restore” is *shûwb*, which means literally or figuratively to turn back or bring home.²⁸ Not only does one find a home in the Lord, in that place of rest and trust as He provides for their needs, but God can also turn back the damage that inevitable accrues, whether slowly or quickly, within a soul that walks through the barrage of hardship faced in this life. This is also a very apt metaphor for the transformation that occurs within a soul during conversion - what was once parched, dry and lacking has received the living water of the Holy Spirit that nourishes those deep places of sadness in a heart and allows it to spring up with joy and life.

This verse continues on to state that He leads His people in right paths for His name’s sake. The psalmist uses a different word for “lead” here than that which was used in verse 2; in this case, the word *nâchâh* implies guiding and leading forth.²⁹ “Right,” or *tsedeq*, is also often translated to say righteousness because it means that which is right, just or normal.³⁰ This this verse has a double meaning in both spiritual and literal application: not only does God lead His people in paths of righteousness, but *sedeq* can

²⁸ Strong, “#h 7725, *shûwb*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 113.

²⁹ Strong, “#h 5148, *nâchâh*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 77.

³⁰ Strong, “#h 6664, *tsedeq*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 98.

also mean that God will lead them on correct paths to the right destination. Another way of saying this is that He will lead them by straight paths as opposed to crooked ones,³¹ which is a concept that is also expressed in Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.” In other words, the Lord leads His children forth along the path which is right for them in life, which is also the way of righteousness. God does this for the sake of His name, or *shêm*, which means His honor, authority or character.³² He guides His people as an expression of His nature.

Craigie also notes some undertones of the exodus in this passage, when God provided for his people and led them through the wilderness. God guided his people to a fruitful land as a shepherd would guide his sheep to green pastures. In Exodus 15, Moses and the Israelites sang a song to the Lord praising Him for guiding them, and verse 13 states: “In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.” The word “abode” used in the Exodus passage is a variation of the word for “meadow” in Psalm 23. In addition, the same verb was used in both passages, translated as “to guide” in Exodus and “to lead” in the Psalm. Finally, *châçêr*, the word used for “lack” in verse 1, is also the same word used in Deuteronomy 2:7: “These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.”³³

³¹ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 216.

³² Strong, “#h 8034, *shêm*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 117.

³³ Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 206.

Psalm 23:4, Even in the Darkest Valley, I Fear No Evil

In verse 4, this psalm shifts. In Psalm 23:4, David asserts that, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.” While the first three verses speak of the peace and provision of God, the next two verses continue on to assert that God provides these for His people even during the midst of life’s greatest trials. In verse 4, David writes that because God is with him, he will fear no evil despite walking through the darkest valley. Many translations say the “valley of the shadow of death.” When one walks in a valley, it is the large surrounding mountains that cast a shadow on the land. In the same way, without the deep well of life that the Holy Spirit places within a soul, which one learns and grows in their ability to access during tribulation, suffering can cast a shadow on a life, causing the decay of what once was someone who was thriving. While death is the ultimate end of decay and destruction, everyone experiences small deaths each day as suffering and sorrow are inexorably linked to living in a fallen world. Thus the shadow of death may be the perfect imagery to convey the reality of these sorrows.

The word for “darkness” or “shadow of death” or has elicited some controversy for commentators. The translation can be tricky because the word actually seems to be a combination of words used for both “shadow” and death” and in Job 10:22 it refers to the realm of the dead.³⁴ Briggs argued that it should more correctly be translated as “darkness” and D. Winton Thomas posited that death may be a superlative image for “very deep shadow” or “deep darkness.”³⁵

³⁴ McCann, *New Interpreter’s*, 768.

³⁵ VanGemeren, *Expositor’s*, 216.

Yet even when walking through the deepest darkness, one does not have to fear evil. Fear, or *yârê'*, literally means to be frightened or to dread,³⁶ and describes the emotion that accompanies the expectation of something bad occurring. Evil, or *ra'*, means adversity, affliction, calamity, distress, harm, misery, trouble, sorrow, evil or wretchedness.³⁷ This concept is also described in John 10:10, which states that “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In other words, there is no need to fear or expect that calamity, harm or evil will have its way in one’s life, for the rod and staff of God provides protection. David encourages himself and his readers that even in times when death may seem like a mountain that casts a shadow over their lives, there is no need to fear because God is with them and will comfort them.

This verse finishes by affirming that God’s rod and staff will comfort His people. A shepherd used a rod to defend against wild animals and a staff to guide and control the sheep.³⁸ The word for rod can also be used to describe a scepter of authority held by a king.³⁹ This again underscores God’s protection and guidance. Comfort can be found in the idea that the Lord is in control and that He will lead His children to still waters and green pastures.

³⁶ Strong, “#h 3372, *yârê'*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 52.

³⁷ Strong, “#h 7451, *ra'*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 109.

³⁸ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 216.

³⁹ McCann, *New Interpreter's*, 768.

Psalm 23:5, A Table Prepared in the Presence of My Enemies

Even in the presence of one's enemies, God prepares a banquet table. Psalm 23:5 says that, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Preparing a table, or *shulchân*, implies setting out a meal like that which is set before a king.⁴⁰ Much as lying down leaves a sheep vulnerable to predators, sitting down to eat leaves a soldier in no position to fight his enemies. Yet, in the presence of one's adversaries, God will prepare a table where His people can be nourished without fear that the enemy will use the opportunity to attack.

Next this psalm provides encouragement that the Lord will also anoint one's head with oil. A host would often anoint the head of an honored guest with perfumed oil before entering a banquet hall.⁴¹ Yet David uses an interesting word to describe "anoint" in this passage: *dâshên* also means to be made fat or to satisfy.⁴² Oil could refer to literal grease but could also figuratively mean richness and fruitfulness.⁴³ Thompson also notes that throughout scripture, oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit and can be used for the purposes of salvation, dedication, privileges, power, knowledge, service, beauty, healing, cleansing and protection.⁴⁴ Therefore in the same way that "pasture" can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically, this goes beyond the concept of physical provision and includes the full list of benefits that God bestows on His people. God will satisfy His people with fruitfulness even to the point of being made fat.

⁴⁰ Strong, "#h 7979, shulchân," *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 117.

⁴¹ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 218.

⁴² Strong, "#h 1878, dâshên," *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 31.

⁴³ Strong, "#h 8081, shemen," *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 118.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, 230.

This verse finishes by asserting that the psalmist's cup overflows. The word used in this passage to describe overflowing is *r^evâyâh*, which means running over and implies wealth.⁴⁵ VanGemeren describes this image of a cup overflowing as a symbol of a “gracious and beneficent manner of entertaining” which reinforces the image of the care and provision of God, that He would give the best to His child.⁴⁶ Much as 1 Peter 1:3-9 looks forward to the eternal inheritance that God gives His people, this psalm also asserts that in the midst of the valley, even in the shadow of death, one's cup still overflows with God's goodness.

Psalm 23:6, Eternal Goodness and Mercy

David closes this psalm by asserting that every day of his life, goodness and mercy follow him. Psalm 23:6 says that, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Goodness, or *tôwb*, means not only goodness but also pleasantness, agreeableness, welfare and benefit; in other words “a good thing.”⁴⁷ “Mercy,” or *cheçed*, means kindness, beauty and favor.⁴⁸ These two things will follow God's people every day of their lives. Goodness and mercy are also used to describe the Lord's character: *tôwb*, was the same word used in Exodus 33:19 to express the goodness of God passing before Moses. Thus this is also an encouragement that God Himself will follow His people all the days of their life and manifest His nature in goodness and mercy. There is no need to fear that He will abandon

⁴⁵ Strong, “#h 7310, *r^evâyâh*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 107.

⁴⁶ VanGemeren, *Expositor's*, 218.

⁴⁷ Strong, “#h 2896, *tôwb*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 45.

⁴⁸ Strong, “#h 2617, *cheçed*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 41.

or change, for as James 1:17 makes clear: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” McCann also links this to verse 3 because the crux provision is found in “His names’ sake” or His character that never changes.⁴⁹

The word used to express that goodness and mercy “follow” is *râdaph*, which means to pursue, chase or run after.⁵⁰ This is another active word and implies that it does not need to be of one’s own effort to find these things, but that God, in His strength and might, will provide for them. God’s provision and kindness will pursue His people and find them no matter where they go, whether in the valley or in the presence of their enemies. Typically in the psalms it is the enemy that pursues, which brings poignancy to this particular passage in that God, in the fullness of the goodness and mercy of His character, pursues His children and renders their enemies unable to harm them.⁵¹

Finally, the psalmist underscores that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Israelites had no belief in an afterlife until after the Old Testament period; instead they believed in a shadowy place called *sheol* or the netherworld. The place of *sheol* was the end of God’s presence and was greatly feared by the Israelites.⁵² In a way, separation from God is quite an accurate way to describe the place that Jesus called hell. By expecting to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, David is showing a pre-Christian understanding of everlasting life in heaven.

⁴⁹ McCann, *New Interpreter’s*, 768.

⁵⁰ Strong, “#h 7291, *râdaph*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 107.

⁵¹ McCann, *New Interpreter’s*, 769.

⁵² Michael L. Barre and John S. Kselman, “Psalms,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 527.

The Hebrew word *’ôrek* used to describe “forever” in this passage, is sometimes translated as “my whole life long” or “for length of days.” The word *’ôrek* is a derivative from *’ârak* which means to lengthen or prolong; however it connotes an everlasting length of time,⁵³ so it is possible that the psalmist was referring not only to his days on earth but indeed to a sense of eternal life. A translation of “forever” in this passage would be consistent with Psalm 139:7-8, which is another psalm attributed to David and states: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there, if I make my bed in *sheol*, you are there.”

For Christian readers, an understanding of eternal life through Christ brings a fuller reading of Psalm 23. Not only can one be thankful for the full table spread before them now, but one can also anticipate future celebration in the eternal house of the Lord.⁵⁴ Dwell, or *yâshab*, can also mean to sit down, to settle, or even to marry.⁵⁵ House, or *baiyth*, can also refer to a household, temple or family.⁵⁶ This implies that this habitation in the house of the Lord, experiencing his provision and kindness, is not only for this life but for the eternity to come. Eating and drinking at the table of God is recognition of a covenant bond, and a covenant does not cease no matter where one may travel. Brueggemann wrote of this symbolic table that “it is not the place but the vitality of the relationship.”⁵⁷ God’s people can settle at the table as a member of the eternal family of the Lord.

⁵³ Strong, “#h 0753, *’ôrek*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

⁵⁴ Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 208.

⁵⁵ Strong, “#h 3427, *yâshab*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 52.

⁵⁶ Strong, “#h 1004, *bayith*,” *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, 20.

⁵⁷ VanGemeren, *Expositor’s*, 218.

New Testament Foundation: First Peter 1:3-9, Hope in Suffering

Context

Since the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians have followed in Jesus' footsteps and shared in the cup of His suffering. The New Testament is clear that followers of Christ are to expect trials and tribulations. For example, in John 15:20, Jesus Himself asserts that "if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you . . . because they do not know Him who sent me." In chapter 16:33, Jesus again warns His disciples that they will face persecution: "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" The Apostle Paul is also clear that believers are to expect tribulation. In Acts 14:22 it states that Paul strengthened and encouraged believers to continue in the faith by telling them that "it is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." Finally, Paul underscores again in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Peter's writings are consistent with Jesus and Paul in assuming that trials should be expected. First Peter 4:12-13 states that believers should "not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when His glory is revealed." Peter then ends his letter in 1 Peter 5:10 by saying that "after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you."

Accordingly, the book of 1 Peter is a letter written to believers who were experiencing opposition and persecution. The trials experienced by his readers is not new and Peter's encouragement in this letter has continued to bring comfort to believers for centuries since the time of its writing, regardless of the type of suffering they are experiencing.

Authorship of 1 Peter

The book of 1 Peter opens by identifying the author as "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ." Throughout most of church history, it was believed that Simon Peter, the disciple of Jesus who later became an Apostle, wrote both 1 and 2 Peter. Many internal and external references in the letter seem to be consistent with this view. Silas, who was mentioned in 1 Peter 5:12 and served as Peter's secretary, was considered to be the same Silas mentioned in Acts 15:22 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Marcus, mentioned in 1 Peter 5:13 was regarded as the same man mentioned in Acts 12:12.⁵⁸ Many early church writings also referred to the letters of Peter without any question of its authorship. Eusebius even quotes Origen (though Origen's original writings were lost) as saying that "Peter, on whom the church of Christ is built, against which the gates of Hades shall not prevail, has left one acknowledged epistle, and, it may be, a second one."⁵⁹

However, since the rise of critical scholarship, there has been stark debate over who wrote the letters, with respected scholars who fall on both sides of the issue. The following are some reasons why Peter's authorship is questioned. The first is that Peter

⁵⁸ Edwin A. Blum, "1 Peter," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 12, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 210.

⁵⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, "1 Peter," *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 49, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, eds. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), xxxiii.

signs his name using the Greek spelling, whereas Paul always referred to Peter by the Aramaic name “Cephas,” even when he wrote to Gentiles. Second, the language and syntax used in the letter is somewhat complicated and they question whether a Galilean fisherman, who was described as unlearned in Acts 4:13, would be capable of writing in such sophisticated Greek. Third, when Peter quotes the Old Testament scripture, it is in Greek and the wording is similar to the Septuagint, rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic which is what a Jew from Galilee would have been familiar with at the time. Fourth, sections of 1 Peter are similar to parts of Romans and Ephesians, and for scholars who doubt Peter’s authorship, this suggests that 1 Peter was written after the Pauline letters and possibly used Ephesians (a book scholars doubt whether it was really written by Paul) as a reference text.

Furthermore, critics suggest that the theological issues addressed in 1 and 2 Peter are those that most likely arose later than Peter’s time. Rather than dealing with the Jewish/Gentile controversies –a current issue of the day– the theological topics in 1 Peter, such as non-retaliation, are more closely related to those faced by Paul’s disciples. Finally, First Peter references the suffering experienced among Christians in Asia Minor, while persecution would have been mostly confined to Rome for the generation following Simon Peter’s. It is also suggested that the book was written before Revelation, as it does not reference emperor worship or institutional persecution, two issues which were to come later. Therefore scholars believe the letter is pseudonymous date it from around 90 CE or the turn of the first century.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ David Bartlett, “The First Letter of Peter,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 12, Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 230-235.

Other scholars believe for a number of reasons that the Apostle Peter was indeed the author, or at least that he could have very likely been the author. First, the early church strongly received the letter as being written by Peter and it was not until the development of critical scholarship that this was questioned. Those who lived much closer to the time of the letter's writing would have had a better sense of its authorship than scholars who began to question it almost two millennia later. Second, certain telltale signs usually hint at a pseudonymous letter and these are absent from the book of 1 Peter. Furthermore, all suggestions by critical scholars as to whether Peter, a fisherman, was or was not bilingual are speculative as the use of Greek was widespread in the Middle East at that time. Even still, in chapter 5 the letter is clear that it was penned by Silvanus, who assisted as a secretary, and he could have been responsible for the sophisticated use of Greek language.

Furthermore, the content and tone of the letter are fully consistent with the time of the apostles. While the persecution may have shifted in its form throughout the years, it is clear from the book of Acts that the early church did experience persecution during Peter's time. First Clement, an early Christian writing of the Apostolic Fathers that was popular with the early church and provides some historical insight, even though it was not accepted into the New Testament canon, says in 5:4-7 that both Peter and Paul were victims of persecution. Finally, 1 Peter 5:13 states that the letter was written from "Babylon," which was a common code name used to represent Rome during that time. Scholars who argue that 1 Peter was written by the Apostle Peter believe that it was probably written from Rome around 62-62, just before the persecution of Nero.⁶¹ If that

⁶¹ Blum, *Expositor's*, 211-212.

was the case and this letter, which was meant to be a circular that was passed from church to church in the region, was already in circulation by the time of the great persecution, rather than being written during this period as critical scholars suggest, it could have served as a great source of comfort to God's people during one of the most difficult periods of Christian persecution in history.

F.W. Beare, a champion of the position that Peter's writings were pseudonymous, admits that "the justification of this thesis must depend on the commentary" rather than biblical or historical evidence since there is no proof one way or another.⁶² Mounce goes even further to state that "to argue against authorship on one's contemporary view of what should have been written is a methodological fault of serious proportions. The case for Petrine authorship is as strong as one could expect from a writing as ancient as 1 Peter."⁶³ This is consistent with the position of this paper: doubts regarding authorship seem to be contemporary speculation based on circumstantial evidence, with no real proof that the Apostle Peter, who has been regarded as the author throughout history until recently, was not the writer of the book.

Original Recipients

The letters of Peter, along with Hebrews, James, 1, 2 and 3 John and Jude, are unique in the New Testament canon because (a) they were not written by the Apostle Paul, and (b) they are not addressed to any one particular church.⁶⁴ In 1 Peter 1:1, Peter

⁶² Blum, *Expositor's*, 211.

⁶³ Robert H. Mounce, *A Living Hope: Commentary on 1 and 2 Peter*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 4.

⁶⁴ Bartlett, *New Interpreter's*, 229.

addresses the letter to “the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” These locations are in northern Asia Minor or modern Turkey. If the letter was indeed written by the Apostle Peter, it may be evidence that he evangelized the northern region of Asia Minor while Paul went to the southern and western areas.⁶⁵

First Peter is addressed to a group of churches who appear, on the surface, to be comprised of Jewish Christians living in Gentile lands. Various phrases used by Peter in the letter would be consistent with a Jewish worldview, such as references to Zion and referring to the outside community as Gentiles. Peter also calls his readers “exiles of the Dispersion” in 1:1 and “aliens and strangers” in 2:11. However, the contemporary scholarly consensus is that it was actually written to Gentile Christians, because all references to the readers’ heritage in 1 Peter would more clearly describe Gentiles. For example, chapter 4 describes the readers as having lived like pagans in “debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry,” which would have much more likely described the behavior of Gentiles than Jews. The letter itself refers to Gentiles, and this probably referred to non-Christians, whether Jewish or pagan, who were outside the community of God. However, the letter’s theology on this idea was not sufficiently developed to suggest that Peter supported the displacement theory, which holds that the Christian community replaced Israel as the people of God.⁶⁶

Whatever the identity of the letter’s recipients, 1 Peter is clear that they were experiencing trials and tribulations. While the specific type of suffering that they were walking through is somewhat unclear, it is evident that Peter’s readers were experiencing

⁶⁵ Blum, *Expositor’s*, 212.

⁶⁶ Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary*, xlv-xlvi, xlix.

persecution and were soon to experience this in greater measure. The trials Peter says are to be expected for a time do not include sickness or disease, but rather the “wrongs done by society and its representatives up to and including execution.”⁶⁷

Goppelt observes two reasons, which are implicit in various sections of Peter’s letter and supported by historical evidence, for the persecution. First, the new customs adopted by the Christian church, such as the closed meetings and references to consuming the body and blood of Christ, coincided with a removal from other societal customs and were perceived to be strange and secretive. It is possible that the population actually suspected the early Christians of criminal acts, which may have been a motivator for Peter’s focus on church order in the letter and his assertion in 4:16 that no one should be brought before a court as a mischief maker or wrong-doer, lest they prove their accusers to be right.

Second, Hellenistic society lived under a guiding principle of conforming tolerance, especially with regard to religion and morals. Much like today, the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to life and that all other religions lead to death was offensive and incomprehensible to them. Thus they perceived Christians to be “guilty of hatred against mankind.”⁶⁸ As these same accusations of close-mindedness and intolerance is increasingly being seen again today in many western societies, what an encouragement that this is not something new; indeed Christians today can find comfort in the fact that there is nothing new under the sun and that they are sharing in the same suffering experienced by the early church.

⁶⁷ Leonard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, Hahn, Ferdinand, ed. Alsup, Jogn, transl. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 38.

⁶⁸ Goppelt, *A Commentary*, 40-42.

Yet even though implicit textual and historical evidence provides clues as to the type of suffering that Peter's readers were experiencing, the letter itself is vague about identifying any particular form of trial. What a blessing to the body of Christ that this is so, as it allows readers throughout history to locate themselves and their situation in the text. Much comfort can be found in the fact that no matter what situation one is faced with, hope always remains the same. God is still good and His promises still remain true.

A Living Hope

Peter begins this passage in verse 3 by giving praise to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Mounce observes the significance of this pronouncement in its shift from the Old Testament, where writers praised God for creating the world and redeeming His people from Egypt. Thus in praising God for being the Father of Jesus Christ, whose death brings a new birth into living hope, Peter is acknowledging that God is no longer the unseen deliverer, but has shown His face and provided not just an earthly deliverance, but a heavenly and eternal deliverance in which His people can hope and rejoice.⁶⁹

It was common for letters written during this time to begin with a blessing or thanksgiving and 1 Peter's blessing starts with a call to hope in suffering. He asserts that by the mercy of God, God's people have been birthed anew, through Christ's resurrection, into a living hope. The full meaning of mercy, or *ēlēōs*, in this passage is "kindness or

⁶⁹ Mounce, *A Living Hope*, 11.

goodwill toward the miserable and the afflicted, joined with a desire to help them.”⁷⁰

Thus 1 Peter begins by reminding the reader of God’s kindness and good will, that He desires to help His children during times of affliction.

This mercy finds its expression in the new birth that is brought forth by the resurrection of Jesus. The word Peter used for new birth, *anagēnnaō*, can also be translated as “born again”⁷¹ and is a metaphor for the fact that a Christian’s mind and soul are so transformed that it is as if a new creature has emerged, totally different than in both nature and expression than the person who lived before conversion. Peter’s use of the phrase “born again” is the only time this specific term appears in the New Testament, though the concept is of course found elsewhere.⁷²

A key aspect of the transformation that occurs during this new birth is that the believer can begin to hope, or *ēlpis* which is a “joyful and confident expectation of good things.”⁷³ While every person has at one time lived in hopelessness, a birthing into God’s kingdom means that one can confidently expect that His goodness and mercy will shine through every circumstance. Peter is encouraging his fellow believers that though affliction inevitably occurs, God in his mercy has caused a hope to spring forth as dramatically as that which is brought to life again, just as –and *because*– Jesus was resurrected from the dead. This new birth and living hope are gifts of God that His people can walk in today; it is not necessary to wait until the manifestation of heaven for the

⁷⁰ James Strong, “#g 1656, ēlēōs,” *A Concise Dictionary of the Greek Testament, with their Renderings in the Authorized English Version*, (Hendersonville, TN: Mendenhall Sales, 1970), 27.

⁷¹ Strong, “#g 0313, anagēnnaō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 11.

⁷² Bartlett, *New Interpreter’s*, 250.

⁷³ Strong, “#g 1680, ēlpis,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 27.

fruit of this new birth to spring up within one's soul. Bartlett describes this living hope: "Hope lives because it is based in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, his triumph over death. Hope lives because death cannot overcome it. Hope lives because even in the face of tribulation it does not back down or grow faint. Living hope is hope that gives life."⁷⁴

Peter links this hope to the resurrection of Jesus, for as He lives so will His followers. Indeed the very foundation of hope hinges on the resurrection of Christ. Jesus provided a glimpse of eternity and the resurrected body when He appeared to hundreds of people after His resurrection. He was the first fruit of the resurrection of all the saints, and without it there would be no such thing. The Apostle Paul expands on this idea as well, in 1 Corinthians 15:16-19:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

To Paul, the resurrection was so key and so foundational that without it the Christian faith would be lost and there would be no such thing as hope; in fact, Christians would be worthy of the most pity among all peoples of the earth. Yet because of the truth of the resurrection, this living hope not only provides expectation for the future, but complete transformation in one's present life.

An Imperishable Inheritance

I Peter 1:4-5 assert that this new birth is also "into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

⁷⁴ Bartlett, *New Interpreter's*, 250.

The object of this hope then, as described by Peter, is the imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance which is kept in heaven. Michaels suggests that the inheritance does not necessarily refer to that which is handed down in a family –though that analogy would be appropriate as well for the children of God– but rather a “sanctioned and settled possession,” in the same way that the land of Canaan was promised to the Israelites. It may have taken generations for the Israelites to experience the manifestation of the land that God had promised, much as Christians today wait for the inheritance promised by God. Just as God was faithful to keep His word to the Israelites, He will likewise remain faithful to His promises to Christians.

While one can experience glimpses of it now, this inheritance is not referring to something already achieved but a hope of eternal inheritance at the end of the age.⁷⁵ Thus, those who are suffering can trust that this is a temporary condition and that their eternal inheritance is theirs in Christ Jesus. Every taste of the inheritance experienced today is not merely a small light on a predominantly dark path, it is a foretaste of the future brightness that is to come and a reminder of the impermanence of suffering.

This eternal inheritance is described as imperishable, undefiled and unfading. Imperishable, or *aphthartōs*, means “undecaying and incorruptible.”⁷⁶ This mirrors how Jesus also described heavenly treasures in Matthew 6:20: “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.” Besides being imperishable, the inheritance is also undefiled, or *amiantōs*, which means “free from that by which the nature of a thing is deformed and

⁷⁵ Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 20.

⁷⁶ Strong, “#g 0862, *aphthartōs*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 17.

debased, or its force and vigor impaired.”⁷⁷ It is what it is, and will remain to be so.

God’s promises never change: He promises eternity and He gives eternity to all those that desire it. Finally, it is also unfading, or *amarantōs*, which means “perpetual, that which does not fade away.”⁷⁸ Its value will never be lost or diminished in any way. This inheritance is kept in heaven for all those who believe, so that they can enjoy Him forever. This good news is so good that even the very hope of its realization can bring joy and rebirth for a tired soul living through the trials of today.

Peter continues on to assert that until the time that inheritance comes to fruition, the power of God, through faith, protects that sense of hope. Yet not only is it hope that is protected; it is protection for the believer in times of trouble as well. Protect, or *phrōurēō*, is a compound phrase which means “to be a watcher in advance; to mount guard as a sentinel; to prevent hostile invasion.”⁷⁹ God, who knows the beginning from the end, is able to see what is coming far before it is ever manifested, much like a watcher knows when an attack is imminent. Thus He has accounted for it since the beginning of time and protects His people from the hostile attacks of the enemy. This verb is in the present passive form, which stresses that this protection is a present work of God; it is something to experience now in this life, even while still waiting in anticipation of the ultimate future deliverance.⁸⁰

It is by His power, or *dunamis*, that He provides this protection. God’s *dunamis* is his miraculous ability or strength; in fact many times this word is used to describe a

⁷⁷ Strong, “#g 0283, amiantōs,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 10.

⁷⁸ Strong, “#g 0263, amarantōs,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 10.

⁷⁹ Strong, “#g 5432, phrōurēō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 76.

⁸⁰ Blum, *Expositor’s*, 220.

miracle.⁸¹ The power of God which protects the hope that one finds in Him is a miracle accomplished by God Himself. It is not something that can be conjured through strength of mind or will, but is the very gift of God, as only His touch can provide renewal.

Faith, or *pistis*, means persuasion or conviction.⁸² Faith is the means by which that power is manifested, as one cannot hope in that for which they are not persuaded. Faith itself is also a miracle provided by God Himself, for as Paul asserts in Romans 3:10-11, “there is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.” Thus both the means and the object of hope are a gift from God. Paul also writes in Ephesians 2:8 that it is “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” In His mercy and through His power alone, He grants a deep sense of assurance about the eternal inheritance waiting for those who believe. This assurance reaches beyond logic and emotion and is placed into the depths of one’s soul as a gift from God for all those who ask for it. What a blessing for because if it were contingent on humankind in any way, it would never be realized.

Verse 5 ends by reiterating the object of God’s inheritance and that which is hoped for: a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Salvation, or *sōtēria*, means rescue, safety, health and deliverance from the molestation of enemies.⁸³ The use of the word *sōtēria* at the time and place in history when this letter was written is much richer than mere deliverance. Christianity borrowed this word from paganism, where deities, goddesses and kings were often given the title “Savior” for bestowing the various

⁸¹ Strong, “#g 1411, dunamis,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 24.

⁸² Strong, “#g 4102, pistis,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 58.

⁸³ Strong, “#g 4991, sōtēria,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 70.

benefits associated with their royalty. Thus it goes beyond deliverance from harm and also includes all sorts of other benefits. Beare elaborates on this idea:

In the Christian usage, it [salvation] has the deepest and most comprehensive significance, embracing in itself all the great Christian thoughts of healing (spiritual or physical), reconciliation, deliverance (especially from the power of demons), redemption, immortality, and the final universal triumph of God.⁸⁴

This salvation –this object of the believer’s hope, which is so very grand that even the mere hope in it is transformative– will be revealed in the last time, which refers specifically to a decisive point when God will bring an end to the way the world has been and enter into a new beginning.⁸⁵

Rejoicing in Trials

Because of the living hope and imperishable inheritance believers are promised in eternity, Peter says in verses 6-7, “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith –being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire– may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Trials can test the genuineness of faith like nothing else can. It is only when a belief is challenged that one can truly determine whether that belief is deeply held; indeed nothing can challenge a hope for healing, deliverance and redemption (salvation) than suffering, trials and tribulations. Thus these experiences test and purify faith the in the same way that gold is tested by fire. To test, or *dōkimazō*, means “to discern or examine to see whether something is

⁸⁴ Charles S. Ball, “First and Second Peter,” *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Charles W. Carter (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 252.

⁸⁵ Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 23.

genuine.”⁸⁶ Peter asserts that this faith is more precious than gold, which is quite an apt analogy because any benefits or comforts that can be bought with gold are rubbish compared to the promised inheritance of God. Blum notes that while men presently value gold and devalue faith, God values faith which will last beyond the time when gold perishes.⁸⁷

Gold is refined through fire, which burns at temperatures that can exceed 1,000 degrees Celsius (1,832 degrees Fahrenheit) and causes the dross or impurities to rise to the top, so that the gold refiner can remove it.⁸⁸ In the same way, the fire of trials causes the deep parts of one’s soul to rise to the surface and become evident. If one lets it, suffering simultaneously reveals and burns away sin, doubt and confusion, leaving pure faith which is worth more than gold. It is during times of suffering, when everything appears to be the opposite of what is hoped for, that one can truly exercise their belief that God is good and sovereign and truly trusts that, as Jeremiah put it, He has “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

During these times of tribulation, one can rejoice even when suffering various trials, which Peter acknowledges will occur for a little while. To rejoice, or *agalliaō*, means literally to jump for joy, exult, or be exceedingly glad.⁸⁹ The word Peter used for suffer, *lupēō*, means distress, sadness, grief, sorrow or heaviness.⁹⁰ On a simple level, finding *agalliaō* in *lupēō* –jumping for joy in the midst of sadness and heaviness– is an

⁸⁶ Strong, “#g 1381, dōkimazō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 24.

⁸⁷ Blum, *Expositor’s*, 221.

⁸⁸ Gold Traders (UK), “How to Refine Gold,” Gold Traders (UK) Ltd, Copyright 2015, accessed online June 22, 2015 at <http://www.gold-traders.co.uk/gold-information/how-to-refine-gold.asp>.

⁸⁹ Strong, “#g 0021, agalliaō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 7.

⁹⁰ Strong, “#g 3076, lupēō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 45.

oxymoron and is completely impossible. Yet, as mentioned above, this transformative work can indeed be accomplished through the *dunamis* power of God. The fruit of this process –a refined faith, cleansed of doubt and confusion, which can only be produced during times of trials– is so valuable that one can rejoice in both the process and its outcome.

Further, Peter assures his readers that sorrow lasts only for a “little while,” or *ōligōs*, which means “puny in duration or value.”⁹¹ Faith allows one to see far enough beyond the present suffering that they are able to rejoice in that which is yet to come. The object of faith –one’s heavenly inheritance– is so marvelous that any suffering presently experienced so pales in comparison with regard to duration or value that it cannot cause any deep sadness. According to Ball, “this is one of the paradoxes of Christian experience. Even though one may not always be conscious of God’s presence, in faith he is confident of it. Grief and trials are real; but grace and faith lighten them so that it is still possible to rejoice.”⁹²

The ultimate result of this is praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Praise, or *ēpainōs*, means commendation or laudation.⁹³ Glory, or *dōxa*, can apply to the Lord’s majesty but when it is applied to a person, it means a good estimate concerning someone.⁹⁴ Honor, or *timē*, means esteem or dignity.⁹⁵ So, when faith is tested by the fire of trials and is found to be genuine and faithful, at the end of the age believers will

⁹¹ Strong, “#g 3641, *ōligōs*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 51.

⁹² Ball, *Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, 254.

⁹³ Strong, “#g 1868, *ēpainōs*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 30.

⁹⁴ Strong, “#g 1391, *dōxa*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 24.

⁹⁵ Strong, “#g 5092, *time*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 72.

experience the approval and commendation of God for having been found pure and steadfast. No temporary disapproval from fellow men can compare to eternal approval from God, and the sense of His smiling that can be experienced both now, in part, and in fullness throughout eternity provides such a deep hope that it enables one to rejoice even in suffering.

The Outcome of Faith

This pericope ends in verses 8-9 which states that, “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Though Peter’s readers had not seen Him, they loved Him and believed in Him and it is the same situation for believers today. The word for love used in this passage, *agapaō*, means “to welcome, be fond of, and love dearly.”⁹⁶ Thus the readers did not just intellectually assent to their hope in Jesus, but they loved Him with deep affection. This is appropriate as the verse goes on to say that “you do not see him now.” The word for now, or *arti*, refers to a short period of time, such as “just now, this day, or this moment.”⁹⁷ Believers will one day see Jesus when they enter into eternity, and the object of their love and faith will be fully realized.

This love is the expression of one’s faith and the result of it in one’s life is an indescribable and glorious joy. When Peter says that one is “receiving,” or *kōmizō*, the outcome of faith, this refers to a taking care of, or “carrying away in order to care for and

⁹⁶ Strong, “#g 0025, agapaō,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 7.

⁹⁷ Strong, “#g 0737, arti,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 16.

preserve.”⁹⁸ It is this joy –again, “carried away” or received from God’s *dunamis* work in one’s life and not mustered in one’s own strength– that serves not only to make the suffering more bearable, but to preserve faith itself as well. Peter again uses a present causal participle, which describes the paradox of the Christian life: while yet waiting for the full manifestation of future glory, one can also experience the new birth and glimpses of the future inheritance in this life today.⁹⁹ The Apostle Paul also speaks of this paradox in Ephesians 1:13-14: “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.” When Jesus ascended, He sent the Holy Spirit to descend on mankind’s hearts and it is only His presence within oneself that can produce the miracle of this transformation.

The outcome of faith is ultimately the salvation of one’s soul. Blum notes that the Semitic use of the word “soul,” or *psyche*, does not imply a metaphysical body-less spirit being, which would be a Greek concept, but the whole self or person.¹⁰⁰ This underscores the dual nature of the hope Peter is referring to in this letter: first, in experiencing glimpses of this salvation now, in this life and in these bodies; and second, that the future resurrection will be a bodily resurrection. Salvation is not just an intellectual assent to certain truths; it is the complete transformation of one’s complete being –body, mind, soul and spirit– and birthing into the living hope.

⁹⁸ Strong, “#g 2865, *kōmizō*,” *Dictionary of the Greek Testament*, 43.

⁹⁹ Blum, *Expositor’s*, 221.

¹⁰⁰ Blum, *Expositor’s*, 221.

Conclusion

Both of these passages provide the believer with a beautiful picture of who God is and what can be hoped for in times of pain. Because God cares and provides for His people, there is no need to fear calamity, destruction or sorrow. Psalm 23 provides a beautiful picture of this care, and translates it into the simple imagery of a shepherd and a host, with which everyone is able to relate. Regardless of the circumstance and indeed even in those that cast a deep shadow upon one's life, one can rest in the abundance that the Lord sets before them. While this abundance is experienced in glimpses today, during this life, its ultimate realization is protected in heaven, where neither moth nor rust can destroy. When passing through this world, which is tainted by decay and sadness, one can look upward toward God and the eternal table that He sets before His people. Goodness and Mercy will always be present. This can be trusted, even when shadows cast their darkness and yes, even into eternity.

In 1 Peter 1:3-9, Peter provides timeless encouragement to the suffering church. Regardless of the type of suffering experienced by readers throughout the ages, hope can be found –as a gift from God– in the goodness and promises of God. Though persecution or trials are experienced for a time, Peter exhorts believers to rejoice in both the process and outcome of their faith, for trials strengthen one's faith and purify it as gold like nothing else can. The object of faith –one's heavenly inheritance– is so marvelous that any suffering presently experienced so pales in comparison with regard to duration or value that the trial cannot cause any deep or lasting sadness. It is only in maintaining this hope as the primary orientation of one's heart that it is possible to rejoice in suffering. Thankfully God, in His mercy, does not require believers to muster either hope or joy in

their own strength, but provides this ability through His power. What may be impossible with man is indeed possible with God.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

While God works in and through everyone who serves Him, once in a while a story comes along that so beautifully exemplifies the way God works through suffering and sacrifice that it serves as an inspiration for all those who hear it. It gives others the boldness to step out into what God is calling them to and helps them to recognize the ways that God is speaking to them and working in and through their lives. One such story that has continued to provide inspiration to believers for almost seventy years is that of Jim Elliot and his four friends –Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian– who gave their lives up in martyrdom as they demonstrated God’s love to the Auca people, a violent tribe living in the jungles of Ecuador. It was this very act that would turn the hearts of one of the most feared tribes in the nation toward Jesus Christ. Today the Aucas are a Christian tribe and they have changed their name to Waorani as a symbol of their new nature in Christ.

These five men were regular Christians, not saints or superstars, and the letters and diaries they left behind illustrate the impact that a normal life can make when one is completely surrendered and dedicated to the Lord. A look into the lives and motivation of these men shows that they represented a wide range of personalities, dispositions and struggles. Their process of hearing God was no different than others today as they go

before the Lord seeking discernment. It was their posture of obedience for anything to which Lord may call them that bore eternal fruit and changed the destiny of the Auca tribe forever.

Yet the story of the Auca conversion was not just a story of the sacrifice of these five men. Everything that God does is larger than an individual, as He works through His body and weaves together myriad details, lives and events to achieve His purposes. God had been making preparations before He ever planted the seed to reach the Aucas in the five men's hearts. After they were martyred, Rachel Saint, Elizabeth Elliott and her three year old daughter Valerie followed up and reentered the Auca village despite the fact that they had just murdered their brother, husband and father. Dayuma, an Auca girl, had escaped her village as a young child, and after a process of healing and forgiveness she eventually returned to home and used her key language skills to preach the Gospel to the tribal community. If any of the following events had not occurred, or individuals had not been faithful to God's calling, the story would not have had such a beautiful ending.

Jim Elliott

Jim Elliott was a disciplined, single minded man who was serious about his relationship with God since a young age. He believed that a desire for any worldly achievement, such as a social life, fame and human respect, status and even academics, was warped and perverted, the "desire of the Gentiles. . . All is vanity below the sun and a 'striving after wind.' Life is not here, but hid above with Christ in God, and therein I rejoice and sing as I think on such exaltation."¹ Therefore everything he did was filtered

¹ Elisabeth Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 17.

through the sieve of whether or not there was eternal value in it. Even when he entered college in 1946, rather than pursuing various interests or extracurricular activities, he was clear in his goal of getting involved only in that which would be good preparation for missionary life. He would stay in each Saturday night in order to be fully alert for the Sunday morning service. He majored in Greek so that he would have the foundation to translate the Bible into an unknown language. Even his choice of foods was with one aim: to preserve a rugged body for strength on the mission field.²

Yet despite his strength of devotion to the Lord, there was a time when he struggled with doubt, particularly with Christ's resurrection, upon which he believed the entirety of faith hinged. Where he found strength was in the numerous eyewitness accounts of Jesus' appearances. Of this he wrote,

There is a strong pull to the philosophy that 'chaos created this lump of clay in his own image' - and to let fall the whole gamut of theological arguments. Again, I'm held by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Were it not that I believed that Jesus was seen of men and proved Himself to be supernatural in outwitting death, I would throw the whole system back to the troubled skies and take a raft down the Mississippi today. But the fact is founding, settling, establishing. It holds as nothing else, and gives the sense that there are answers, not yet discovered, for which I must wait.³

Jim did not believe in dating, and rather saw it as a distraction from the purposes of God. Yet God had different plans, and he found himself spending a lot of time with a girl named Elisabeth. She had chosen a Greek major for the same reason as him. They both struggled with the fear that marriage would distract them from a singular focus on God. They continued for a few more years just as friends, and Jim was especially

² Elisabeth Elliott, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliott*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 37-40.

³ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 20.

committed to beginning his missionary life in Ecuador as a single man. Eventually, they felt the Lord leading toward marriage and Elisabeth would later join him in Ecuador.

After a six week trip to Mexico during college, Jim immediately connected with the culture and knew God was calling him to Latin America. During his junior year, God began to speak to him about reaching remote tribes that had never heard the Gospel. He wrote: "I only hope that He will let me preach to those who have never heard that name Jesus. What else is worthwhile in this life? I have heard of nothing better. 'Lord, send me!'"⁴

Toward the end of 1950, Jim and his friend Pete Fleming met Dr. Tidmarsh, an English missionary who was serving in the Amazon jungle, who told them of the challenges the missionaries were experiencing there, particularly with regard to reaching the deadly Auca tribe. His wife was experiencing health issues and they needed to return home, leaving a void in the mission work. Jim spent ten days in prayer, and came away convinced that this was the specific call that God had been leading him toward. He describes his process of hearing God as follows:

My going to Ecuador is God's counsel. . . and my refusal to be counseled by all who insist I should stay and stir up the believers in the U.S. And how do I know it is His counsel? 'Yea, my heart instructeth me in the night seasons.' Oh, how good! For I have known my heart is speaking to me for God! . . . No visions, no voices, but the counsel of a heart which desires God.⁵

As he devoted himself completely to the Lord and daily dedicated himself and his entire heart to God, Jim believed that if he was feeling led to do something, and continued to sense this after much prayer, that it must be God's leading. He did not lose

⁴ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 18.

⁵ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 14.

too much time questioning it; once he sensed it, he was wholeheartedly obedient and full steam ahead. By February 1952, Jim and his friend Pete would be on a boat sailed for Ecuador.

Pete Fleming

Pete was born in Seattle, WA in 1928. He was converted at the age of thirteen after hearing the testimony of a blind evangelist, and ever since that day he walked with God in a way that seemed beyond his years. In college he studied philosophy and experienced a period of confusion and inner conflict, but came back to the Word of God as his foundation.

Pete was also greatly impacted by speaking to Dr. Tidmarsh about Ecuador, as was Jim. Of the impact of this meeting, he wrote,

Since your [Dr. Tidmarsh's] visit I have been very much in prayer about going to Ecuador. In fact, I have never prayed so much before the Lord about anything. Jim and I have exchanged several letters in which I told him of the increased desire to go forth, and of the Scriptures which God seemingly had brought to mind to confirm it. My thinking, both in and outside of the Scriptures, was directed toward the stringency of Christ's words to His disciplines, when he sent them forth: 'I send you forth as sheep among wolves. . . 'He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. . . 'He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' It has seemed to me that the severe requirements of a difficult field like Ecuador are matched on a spiritual level by the severe requirements placed on real disciples. Ecuador, as it seems, is a God-given opportunity to place God's principles and promises to the extreme test. . . The door seems to be opening at a time when I was looking to the Lord regarding the future, and thus is the Lord's answer to my prayers.⁶

When describing what this call looked like to him, Pete wrote that he believed a call to the mission field is the same as any other guidance, that it is “nothing more nor

⁶ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 23.

less than obedience to the will of God, as God presses it home to the soul by whatever means He chooses.”⁷

Once Pete and Jim arrived in Ecuador, they first spent a few months in Quito learning Spanish. Even during that time, God was already putting the Aucas on the hearts of Jim and Pete. During those first few months, Pete wrote:

I am longing now to reach the Aucas if God gives me the honor of proclaiming the Name among them. . . I would gladly give my life for that tribe if only to see an assembly of those proud, clever, smart people gathering around a table to honor the Son - gladly, gladly, gladly! What more could be given to a life?⁸

While he may not have realized at the time that he would eventually be martyred, even at this early stage Pete was dedicated to giving himself completely to the Lord regardless of the cost.

After spending their initial months in Quito learning Spanish, Jim and Pete traveled to Shandia, which was a mission station among the Quichua people, a peaceful and gentle tribe who worked alongside the missionaries. Filled with a sense of excitement and expectancy, they learned all about the Quichua people and began settling into the rhythm of their new Ecuadorian life. They lived and learned under Dr. Tidmarsh, the English missionary who had first introduced them to the country of Ecuador. Eventually, as planned, Dr. Tidmarsh had to leave to attend to his wife's health. During their time in Shandia, Pete and Jim learned about the language and culture of the Quichua people, and came to understand some of their motivations and paradigms as well. Yet Jim and Pete felt like foreigners who were unable to really address the paradigms and customs of the Quichua people. As a result they reopened the missionary school that had previously been

⁷ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 22.

⁸ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 26.

closed and focused on teaching and preaching to the young people in the community. Yet they did not forget about the Aucas, and wondered when God would give them the opportunity to reach out to this hostile tribe. They eagerly tried to pick up every clue they could about the Aucas as they lived in Shandia. During this time, Pete wrote, "The thought scares me at times, but I am ready. We have believed God for miracles, and this may include the Aucas. It has got to be by miracles in response to faith. No lesser expedient is a short-cut. O God, guide!"⁹

Ed McCully

Ed and Jim grew up as childhood friends. Ed was a Christian, but was not deeply serious about his faith. During college he was an athlete and studied business and economics. Soon after college he entered law school, anticipating that he would work in law, and took a job as a hotel clerk to pay for school. Instead of spending the long nights studying as he had intended, he began spending his free time reading the Word. The more he read, the more he became transformed and felt less and less able to spend his time doing anything that was not completely Kingdom focused. He wrote about this experience to Jim in September 1950:

Each night the Lord seemed to get hold of me a little more. Night before last I was reading in Nehemiah. I finished the book, and read it through again. Here was a man who left everything as far as position was concerned to go do a job nobody else could handle. And because he went the whole remnant back in Jerusalem got right with the Lord. Obstacles and hindrances fell away and a great work was done. Jim, I couldn't get away from it. The Lord was dealing with me. On the way home yesterday I took a long walk and came to a decision which I know is of the Lord. In all honesty before the Lord I say that no one or nothing beyond Himself and the Word has any bearing upon what I've decided to do. I have one desire now - to live a life of reckless abandon for the Lord, putting all my energy and

⁹ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 47.

strength into it. Maybe He'll send me someplace where the name of Jesus Christ is unknown. Jim, I'm taking the Lord at His word, and I'm trusting Him to prove His Word. It's kind of like putting all your eggs in one basket, but we've already put our trust in Him for salvation, so why not do it as far as our life is concerned? If there's nothing to this business of eternal life we might as well lose everything in one crack and throw our present life away with our life hereafter. But if there is something to it, then everything else the Lord says must hold true likewise.¹⁰

Subsequently, only one day before he was supposed to register for the next semester, Ed decided to quit law school and become a missionary. He could no longer function in the world as normal and could only spend his time doing nothing less than that which had eternal significance. Soon after, he married a young girl named Marilou and began studying at the School of Missionary Medicine in Los Angeles. This program allowed him to become familiar with tropical disease, obstetrics and dentistry in preparation for life on the mission field. By the end of 1953, he, his wife Marilou and their eight month old son Stevie set sail for Ecuador.

Like Jim and Pete, Ed and Marilou spent some months in Quito to learn Spanish before traveling into the jungle. Learning Spanish was more discouraging for Ed's family than it was for Pete and Jim, yet they remained dedicated and excited about their commitment to Ecuador.

While Ed and his family were still in Quito, one day he got a radio call from Shell Mara bearing the news that a flood had destroyed all of the buildings in Shandia. Ed traveled to Shandia earlier than planned in order to help rebuild in the wake of the flood and make a place for his family, who came soon after. After a short time in Shandia, Ed, his wife Marilou and their two young children moved to an old station in Arajuno. Arajuno was on the far western boundary of Auca territory and had been abandoned by

¹⁰ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 51.

Shell Oil Company after three of their employees were killed by the Aucas. This would become the launching point for what the group would call "Operation Auca."

Nate Saint

Nate Saint had developed a love for airplanes at a very young age and it became somewhat of an obsession for him as a young child. At thirteen, he contracted a severe case of osteomyelitis in his leg. During that sedentary time he wondered whether God might call him to be a missionary one day, but he did not consider it deeply. His high school and post-high school years were spent learning various technical skills such as welding, mechanic work and flying. After learning to fly during a job at a small airport, he was set to enter the Air Force pilot cadet program which would teach him to fly large scale airplanes. However, the night before he was to report to the first military flight training, his osteomyelitis became inflamed again, which forced him to drop out of the program. He was so disappointed and thought his dream was dead. After exiting the hospital, instead of becoming a pilot he took a job as an Air Force maintenance crew chief.

Yet much like Ed McCully, God used Nate's free time at work to transform his heart and direct him in the path that He had for him. Serving as a pilot would have been all consuming, but the extra time he found himself with at this job allowed him to read the Bible. The Word arrested his heart and within a year, he felt called to be a missionary. God used his sickness to direct Nate's life toward His purposes.

Nate describes this conversion and the subsequent call:

I wasn't hearing anything with my ears, anyhow. I pleaded helplessly with my Heavenly Father for the answer that stood between me and the peace that Jesus

had said should be ours. Now, you've heard about people being spoken to by God. I don't know about the other fellow, but that night I saw things differently . . . BING . . . like that. Just as though a different Kodachrome slide had been tossed onto the screen between my ears. As soon as I could, I stepped out of the building and started out . . . just to get away from people. It was snowing and there was already a deep virgin snow on the ground, and the moan of city traffic had been muffled as it is when deep snow is around. A joy, such as I had never known since the night I accepted Jesus' forgiveness for my sins, seemed to leave me almost weak with gratitude. It was the first time that I had ever really heard that verse: 'Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.' The old life of chasing things that are of a temporal sort seemed absolutely insane.¹¹

After dedicating his life to God in a new way, Nate thought that he would have to give up flying in order to prepare for the mission field until he found out about Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF). God knew what he had in store for Nate and everything he had learned already was preparation for missionary service, including his time working on the maintenance crew.

After a brief time of MAF service in Mexico and some college studies, Nate married a girl named Marj and four days later they left for California, where Nate took his first assignment fixing a plane in anticipation of his new assignment to Ecuador.

Nate and Marj lived in a small village called Shell Mera, which was the base for MAF in eastern Ecuador. This base was about a day's walk from Shandia, where Jim, Pete and eventually Ed were eventually stationed, though Nate and Marj were already settled by the time the other arrived in Ecuador.

Nate and Marj built a house to host various missionaries as they passed through Shell. Nate would faithfully and methodically provide air transportation and supplies to remote or isolated mission posts, and became a source of great encouragement for missionaries who lived well beyond the radius of normal accessibility. His wife Marj

¹¹ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 68.

would operate the radio which guided and provided information to the planes in flight and coordinate the various orders for food and supplies from the remote mission stations.

Nate believed that a life should unload all unnecessary weight that wouldn't bear eternal fruit, and as a pilot he did the same thing, engineering his plane to have the least amount of excess weight in order to leave more room for transporting food and cargo. He also invented many other tools and methods; one of these was a method of circling the plane so that a cloth bucket could be dropped from a fifteen hundred foot string and centrifugal force would cause it to suspend motionless in mid-air. This allowed the plane to drop mail, medicine or other supplies without landing, or even for a phone to be lowered so that he could speak to a missionary on the ground in cases when there was no sufficient landing strip. This technique proved invaluable when the team eventually reached out to the Aucas.

Nate looked to the army as an analogy of the life and position of those who serve the Lord, and considered himself to be expendable for the cause of Christ. In a short radio sermon he gave at the HCJB missionary radio station in Quito, he shared:

During the last war we were taught to recognize that, in order to obtain our objective, we had to be willing to be expendable. . . This very afternoon thousands of soldiers are known by their serial numbers as men who are expendable. . . We know there is only one answer to our country's demand that we share in the price of freedom. Yet, when the Lord Jesus asks us to pay the price for world evangelization, we often answer without a word. We cannot go. We say it costs too much. . . [yet] God didn't hold back His only Son, but gave Him up to pay the price for our failure and sin. Missionaries constantly face expendability. Jesus said, 'there is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my sake and the Gospel's but shall receive a hundredfold now in this time and in the world to come eternal life.'¹²

¹² Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 60.

At first, Nate had no desire to reach out to the Aucas, as he felt the possibility of jeopardizing his support to other missionaries was too great to risk his life. Rachel, his sister, had expressed interest in the Aucas and Nate replied, “I don’t fly over them. I fly around them.”¹³ Yet during his time in Shell, like Jim and Pete, God was slowly preparing Nate for reaching out to the Aucas. It started with the recognition that the airplane might be the only way to find the tribe, as no one knew of their whereabouts and no other tribes wanted to live within any proximity of them for fear of being speared. As his heart was being softened, Nate wrote:

Not long ago we talked with another missionary who is longing to reach a tribe of killers, the Aucas. Few white persons have contacted them in a friendly way and lived to tell about it. We expect the airplane to play an essential part in reaching these people with the Gospel.¹⁴

Roger Youderian

Roger Youderian was born in Montana and contracted polio when he was nine years old. He studied agriculture in college and later enlisted in the Army. His faith was strengthened during that time and he wrote in December 1944,

The happiest day of my life was the day I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior for the remission of my sins, duly repented for, and with God's help I hope and pray for the faith and strength to glorify our Father through my daily living as a witness and follower of Christ. Searching the Scriptures is my greatest source of hope and inspiration, having yet to learn the full power of prayer. I used to say, 'This is a great world.' With this new faith, this feeling has increased a thousandfold and I fairly ache within from happiness and rejoicing in sharing God's manifold blessing which He gives to this world with Infinite mercy and grace.¹⁵

¹³ Ethel Emily Wallis, *The Dayuma Story: Life Under Auca Spears*, (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 26.

¹⁴ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 71.

¹⁵ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 74.

Much like Ed and Nate, when God arrested Roger's heart he was unable to do anything other than serve Him with his life. In August 1945 he wrote his mother again,

I've a secret to tell you, Mother, in this more than anything in the world I want the action to precede the announcement. Ever since I accepted Christ as my personal Savior last fall and wanted to follow Him and do the will of the Lord, I've felt the call to either missionary, social or ministerial work after my release from the service. Can't say now what the calling will be but I want to be a witness for Him and live following Him every second of my life.¹⁶

After leaving the Army, he took some college classes and met his future wife, Barbara. They married and continued some missionary preparatory classes until they were accepted into the Gospel Missionary Union and were sent to Ecuador. They studied Spanish in Shell Mera for some months until leaving for the Macuma station, which was located in the territory of the Jivaro people. For a year Roger served with the Jivaros, who operated under a system of hate, fear and violence. Children, as they fell asleep each night, were taught to repeat a list of names of people who they were to hate. They had a strict code of vengeance and it was customary to kill any relative in order to pay the "debt," as they called it (what we would call justice) of another relative. After that time he began to pray for a new assignment reaching unreached tribes. God soon gave him the opportunity, and he and Nate Saint were together able to reach the Atshuaras, who were beyond the missionaries' mapped territory and had never heard the Gospel.

About three years into his time as a missionary and before he was approached by Nate to join the team that was to reach out to the Aucas, Roger was starting to experience some burnout. He did not describe it that way; his team later described it as a spiritual struggle and he himself perceived it as failure. However his symptoms suggested classic burnout: discouragement from seeing a lack of fruit from his efforts, feelings of

¹⁶ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 75.

hopelessness and pointlessness, a sense of spiritual disconnectedness after the initial dramatic leading and guiding of the Spirit waned, and feelings of guilt and apathy. He wrote in his diary:

"About ready to call it quits. Seems to me there is no future in the Jivaria for us, and the wisest thing for us to do will be to pull stakes. . . The reason: Failure to measure up as a missionary and get next to the people. As far as my heart and aspirations are concerned, the issue is settled. It's a bit difficult to discern just what is the cause of my failure and the forces behind it. Since March, when we left Wambini, there has been no message from the Lord for us. I just picked up my Bible to share with the same Lord who made me a new creature in England eleven years ago. There was no word of encouragement from Him. He had kept us safe and wonderfully, and met our needs, but the issue is far greater than that. There is no ministry for me among the Jivaros or the Spanish, and I'm not going to try to fool myself. I wouldn't support a missionary such as I know myself to be, and I'm not going to ask anyone else to. . . The cause of Christ in the Jivaria will not suffer for our having been there, but I must be honest and confess that it has not been helped. . . There is no spiritual pressure in the issue, and in fact very little of emotion or stress; perhaps none. . . I believe the Lord chose the Jivaria for us but I just didn't measure up to it. . . I do not put any blame on personalities or circumstances involved; the failure is mine, and my failure to achieve the personal experience of Christ that could meet the needs here. It didn't pan out. . . This is the first time in my life that I have turned my back, but they say there is a first time for everything. . . Whatever He has for us is fine but I'm afraid that anything along missionary lines has been scared out of me. If I couldn't make the grade here in Macuma I'm not foolish enough to expect a change of setting would change me. . . Of this much I'm sure: it will draw me to read His word more, be more tolerant of others, and less venturesome in my activities.¹⁷

It was exactly during this time that Nate invited Roger to join in the mission to the Aucas. He struggled deeply for a little while, unsure if he should join physically when he was not fully in step with the others spiritually. His wife had a sense that Roger recognized a bit of what this decision might mean for him, and he spent hours on his knees before the Lord in petition for guidance. Yet afterward, his wife writes that "he was

¹⁷ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 152-153.

cleansed through the Spirit for the task that lay ahead of him, and went with a happy, expectant mind and his heart full of joy."¹⁸

The Auca Tribe

The Aucas were semi nomadic and isolated, living in the jungles of Ecuador. There were estimated to be about five hundred to a thousand of them and they occupied a territory of twelve thousand square miles, as the Quichua left them a wide margin of space so that they would not accidentally bump into them.

The first missionary to reach out to them was a Jesuit priest named Pedro Suarez and he was murdered by spear in 1667. The Aucas were left alone for about two hundred years until rubber hunters entered the area and plundered, burned Auca homes, raped their women, tortured them and enslaved them between 1875 and 1925. The last missionary to reach out to them, a Jesuit missionary who visited in 1864, was unable to build a mission base as he had to spend most of his time protecting the Aucas from the violence of the rubber hunter. The hunters believed, as many did during that time, that those not living in western society, including this jungle tribe, were primitive and of lesser breed. This created a deep, and understandable, hatred of white people among the Auca tribe. While there were some survivors, attempts to interact with them often ended in death. Nate described them: "For a number of years, the Aucas have constituted a hazard to explorers, an embarrassment to the Republic of Ecuador, and a challenge to missionaries of the Gospel."¹⁹

¹⁸ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 154-155.

¹⁹ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 96.

Reaching the Aucas

It was a prayer on all five men's hearts to reach the Aucas. No one knew where they lived, though Nate, who used to avoid their territory at all costs, would now search for them during his flights. Each of them was being prepared in their own ways for the plan that God had for their lives. The five men learned all they could about the Auca tribe, including their strategies and methods for killing as told by an Ecuadorian survivor. No distinct pattern could be identified for the killings: sometimes it was to rob, other times it was to defend their territory or find retribution for a wrongdoing, but other times it seemed to have no discernable motivation at all. Those who were familiar with the Aucas believed that there was no hope for an outsider to live peacefully or gain friendship with them; that the damage done by years of rubber hunters ravaging the people and the land had done too great a damage. Yet these five men knew that the love of God could overcome all evil, and wondered as to whether they would have the honor of reaching out to these people.

One clear day in September, 1955, when the group of five couples felt it was God's time for them to begin reaching out to the Aucas, Nate and Ed took an exploratory flight over Auca territory. After years of unfruitful attempts, this time they finally spotted a clearing where an Auca village was located. They had finally found them. Then, only a few weeks later, Nate and Pete were able to spot another Auca settlement during a transport flight. This settlement was located only fifteen minutes by plane from Ed's house in Arajuno.

In the meantime, Jim visited with a girl named Dayuma. Dayuma was an Auca who grew up among the Quichuas after she had escaped as a child when her family was

killed. She taught him some basic Auca phrases, such as "I like you and want to be your friend," "what is your name," and "I want to approach you." Yet she warned to "never, never trust them [the Aucas]. They may appear friendly and then they will turn around and kill."²⁰

Still, the group was determined to reach out. They decided to begin by repeatedly dropping gifts in order to soften their hostility. Nate's spiraling line technique was a key to showing their intentions of gift giving, as they later learned that when an old Shell company's plane tried to drop gifts, the Aucas believed that the supplies fell out of the plane's stomach after it was wounded by their spears. On October 6, they began with the first gift drop: an aluminum kettle, filled with twenty colored buttons and some rock salt, all tied together with brightly colored ribbon streamers. Each week they dropped another gift, dangling with streamers –machetes, ax heads, beads– on various houses, and each week more and more Aucas would congregate in anticipation of the drops. Using a loudspeaker, the men shouted their newly learned Auca phrases out the side of the plane, "I like you! I am your friend! I like you!" in hopes that the tribe could hear. On the third drop, their line got snagged in the river and when an Auca helped to untangle it, they marveled at the thrill of holding a line which was held on the other end by a member of the tribe they so longed to reach.

After the fourth drop, when the men started to look for a place where they might eventually land, Nate wrote:

May God continue to put His good hand on the project and may we drop it when not fully assured of His direction. At present we feel unanimously that God is in it. May the praise be His, and may it be that some Auca, clothed in the righteousness

²⁰ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 104.

of Jesus Christ, will be with us as we lift our voices in praise before His throne. Amen.²¹

On the sixth drop, they noticed that the Aucas located at the house which had displayed the most excitement about the gifts, had cleared a patch of land. This time, when they dropped a pot from the line, one of the Aucas tied on a headband of woven feathers in return. The group took this as an encouragement and a sign to proceed. Ed described the day in his diary as, "a real answer to prayer, another sign to proceed, an encouragement that friendly relations are possible and that they will hear the Gospel!"²² The group continued to drop and receive gifts over a period of about three months.

After a couple more drops, Nate, Jim and Ed were sure that they wanted to continue, and Pete was unsure and committed it to prayer. It was at this time that Nate thought of Roger as a possible fourth person and he agreed. In December the team searched for a suitable landing site, which they called Palm Beach, for a planned landing on January 2, 1956.

It seemed hopeless to reach them before that fateful day in September 1955 when Ed and Nate spotted the Auca house. For fifteen weeks they made regular flights over the village. Aucas built a platform so they could get closer to the plane. Encouraged by the return of gifts, they searched for a place to land.

Finally the day came when they believed it was God's time for them to reach the Aucas. Over a course of six round trips, Nate dropped all of the supplies into the landing strip, including pieces of the prefabricated treehouse built by Jim. A shaft with ribbons

²¹ Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 145.

²² Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor*, 148.

was used to identify the men as the ones who dropped the gifts from the air. They found a defensible position in case of attack.

Friday, January 6, 1956, after three days of waiting, three Aucas appeared. The men called the young man George, along with a young girl Delilah, and an older woman. They played with a model plane, yoyos, and they tried to visually explain how to build an air strip so that the plane could land in their village. They ate together and hoped for an invitation to visit the Auca village.

Later in the afternoon, the Aucas left and the men waited for their return. On Sunday it looked hopeful that they would come. At 12:30, the men radioed their wives saying that it was looking hopeful for the Aucas to come back that day, as Nate saw them coming from the air. They planned to radio again at 4:30, but instead there was silence. After a few days of waiting, there was still radio silence, and search teams set out by air and foot, eventually finding the bodies of the five men in the river. They had been killed by spear by the returning Aucas.

Rescue teams found the missionary plane with the wings stripped, destroyed, eventually found the five bodies and had a small memorial service for them on Palm Beach, where their bodies would be laid to rest. Nate's recovered wristwatch had stopped at ten minutes after three.

The answer as to whom and why they were killed remained a mystery. Elisabeth went back to Shandia where she and Jim had worked with the Quichuas. Headlines of the fallen missionaries spread throughout the world and people sent the widows letters of how the story inspired them. Elisabeth describes that time:

People all over the world began to pray for the Aucas. I prayed too but it seemed a faithless prayer at times. I asked God to open a door somehow, but I had no idea

what to suggest. I asked Him to send somebody in there. Somebody who tell them what the five men had wanted to tell them: that the God who made them actually cared about them and that He was worth trusting. I told the Lord that I would go if He wanted me to, but that seemed absurd too. If five men had been killed, who would ever succeed? I knew that God could do it if He wanted to, and that was the reason for prayer. Prayer is not a vain thing.²³

In November 1958, two Auca women left their tribe and visited a Quichua village. They came to Shandia to live with Elisabeth. Dayuma, who had lived with Rachel Saint, Nate's sister, had given some language information and Elisabeth started from there. One day, the three decided to go home. When they returned, they invited the two women and Elisabeth's daughter Valerie to come live with them. The women found strength in Isaiah 50:7, "therefore have I set my face like a flint and I know that I shall not be ashamed."

On October 6, 1958, two and a half years after the massacre, the three left for Auca country. It was a three day journey. The first one they saw was Delilah, who turned out to be Dayuma's younger sister. They met some of the men who had murdered their husbands. They showed no hostility to the women, and learned that they had strict ideas about what conditions it was okay to kill in, and that they thought all outsiders, including the men, were cannibals; therefore in their minds, the only right thing to do was to kill the men before they themselves were killed. Now Dayuma and the two Auca women had convinced them that the white people were not out to harm them, and so the women were safe. The Auca women told the others about God and about Jesus, and the two visiting women integrated as best as they could into Auca lifestyle. They tried to learn the language, and three year old Valerie turned out to be a great help in that regard.

²³ Auca Missionary Foundation, Inc., *A Sacred Cinema Release: Through Gates of Splendor*, (Chester Springs, PA: Good News Productions, 1961), accessed January 14, 2016 through VUDU video on demand service.

During weekly meetings, Dayuma taught them stories about Jesus or the Old Testament, and described about how it applied to the Auca lifestyle. She told them that Jesus says not to kill, so some of the men stopped making spears. After this, they only made spears for killing animals. "One even gave his spear as a gift to one of the pilots. 'But tell him not to kill any people with it,' the man said to me, 'tell him it's only for killing animals.'"²⁴

Elisabeth describes her motivation for returning to the tribe who had killed her husband

This was the motivation: The will of God, obedience to the will. When I went to live with the Aucas, I couldn't do anything that a missionary ordinarily does. I couldn't preach or teach. I couldn't help them very much medically. I certainly had nothing to offer them socially. I couldn't even witness, as we usually define the word. Then I found a verse one day as I was reading in Isaiah: 'Ye are my witnesses, that ye might know and believe Me and understand that I am He.' To be a witness is to know God. This is what I wanted to do: know Him. And there is only one road to knowing Him: obedience. Jesus said if any man willeth to do His will, he shall know.²⁵

The Aucas, the same people who killed the men, now lived in peace with the women. They built them houses, repaired their roofs, and cooked with them. Jim would never know that his daughter would be the first child to grow up with the Aucas in peace. Yet it was his sacrifice, and that of the four other men, that indeed paved the way for the Aucas to hear the name of Jesus. "They succeeded: not in converting the Aucas, not even in speaking to them of the name of Jesus, which the Aucas had never heard. The Indians could not have imagined the real reason for these white men being on that beach. They simply took them as a threat to their own way of life, and speared them. But the men

²⁴ Auca Missionary Foundation, Inc., *A Sacred Cinema Release: Through Gates of Splendor*.

²⁵ Auca Missionary Foundation, Inc., *A Sacred Cinema Release: Through Gates of Splendor*.

succeeded. They did the thing they had set out to do: they had obeyed God. They had taken literally His words: The world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever."²⁶

Conclusion

Each of these men gave their lives for the Gospel and it was their obedience which changed the lives of the Auca tribe forever. In so doing, God weaved the events together to bring fruit out of the dire events. God so loved this tribe, which had been living in such hate, fear and bondage for so long and he placed that love inside the hearts of these five families. Their thrill upon making contact with the Aucas can only be a reflection of God's heart as he reaches out to every one of us. Their excitement at even the smallest gesture or response from the Aucas so poignantly illustrates God's heart to be in relationship with every person of the earth. Just as these men took such care in planning out the way that they would approach the Aucas, God does the same in communicating with His people in a way that individual hearts will understand.

²⁶ Auca Missionary Foundation, Inc., *A Sacred Cinema Release: Through Gates of Splendor*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

It is an understatement to call suffering a complicated matter. Libraries could be filled with the writings of those seeking to make sense of this phenomenon, and lakes could be supplied with the tears of those who have experienced trials and disappointments. It is impossible to exist in this life without tasting it in one form or another, for it has touched deeply into the lives of every human being. Every day presents both the joys and the anguish of the human existence and it is impossible to escape as long as breath fills one's lungs. Thus the inherency of suffering to the human condition makes it a fundamental concept for most religious traditions.

Morreall argues that religion itself developed as a means for explaining the fears of humanity, with suffering being one of the most basic fears. He playfully reworked Descartes' famous quote: "I worry, therefore I am religious."¹ Explaining the existence of evil and suffering in light of an omnipotent and benevolent God is a major concern for monotheistic religions, but suffering is nonetheless still an important issue for pantheistic and folk religions as well. As Richard Rice articulates, "suffering unsettles us because it

¹ John Morreall, *The Religion Toolkit: A Complete Guide to Religious Studies*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 18.

threatens one of our deepest convictions. Whether one is consciously aware of it or not, everyone clings to the belief that the world is orderly and life makes sense.”²

While there are hundreds of sects and derivatives of various religions around the world, the following describes how the major world religions deal with the problem of suffering, and where they fall short in providing a satisfactory answer to the problem. This paper provides a definition of suffering, followed by a description of how some of the world’s major religions have answered this problem. After that is a discussion on how the Christian theologians have dealt with this issue, and finally an offer of a workable framework under which ministers can understand and respond to suffering.

What is Suffering?

Joseph Kirzone equates suffering with pain and defines it as “an unpleasant feeling caused by an emotional, psychological, or physical experience that disturbs our well-being and our peace of mind, and causes great discomfort.”³ Each experience of suffering certainly differs with regard to its nature and scope. What is considered misery for one may not be considered so for another, as people vary so greatly in their personality type, coping skills, history and spiritual paradigm. Further, sometimes insignificant causes may end up causing more suffering than seemingly severe causes.⁴ Kirzone’s definition provides an effective catch-all for the myriad types of suffering that exist; yet on a philosophical and theological level suffering is much deeper than a

² Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 19.

³ Joseph F. Kirzone, *The End of Suffering*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 3.

⁴ Daniel J. Simundson, *Faith Under Fire: Biblical Interpretations of Suffering*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1980), 14.

discomfort or disturbance. For many, it tears at the very core of their worldview and for others it causes such deep distress that even death itself may seem like a welcome relief.

Suffering and Evil

It is clear that suffering is inextricably linked to the concept of evil. Suffering did not exist in the Garden of Eden before sin was introduced into the world. Adam and Eve lived in a fruitful land that knew no evil: “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. . . And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” (Genesis 2:9, 2:25) When they sinned by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were driven from the garden and introduced to suffering. Pain, toil and death were all part of the judgment pronounced in Genesis 3. This curse of suffering was certainly due to their sin, yet the presence of the snake suggests that outside, negative forces were also at work, as Eve may not have thought to eat of the fruit had it not been suggested by the snake.

Yet it is important to note that suffering is not synonymous to evil. Evil implies culpability. Suffering, while sometimes caused by oneself or another person, does not always imply that a particular person or persons are at fault. In this regard, Wendy Farley writes of the unique character of radical suffering:

Sin and radical suffering are similar in that both are ways the human spirit can be broken. They are forms of evil rather than mortality because they prevent human beings from pursuing or even desiring the good. They are different from one another in that sin is the corruption of the human spirit by indifference to or desire for evil. In contrast, radical suffering is a kind of crippling of the human spirit by contingent and external forces. One is accountable for guilt in a way that one is not accountable for one’s own suffering.⁵

⁵ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. 1st Ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 41-42.

Peter Kreeft identifies three basic types of evil: (a) suffering, which he defines as a disharmony or alienation between oneself and something else in this physical world, whether it be a loved one, health, material goods, or a myriad of other possibilities; (b) death, which is an ultimate disharmony or separation between the soul and body; and (c) sin, which in turn is the disharmony and alienation between the soul and God.⁶ Evil and suffering then, to Kreeft, are both forms of disharmony or disunity. Suffering is just one type of evil and in defining death as an ultimate separation, both in turn are forms of small “deaths” experienced before one’s final separation from this world. This observation is astute as both suffering and death were introduced at the fall, when the world became fallen and broken. Suffering foreshadows death, and both were such a grave human problem that God Himself would come down to earth to conquer death in order to give life to the world.

Types of Suffering

Typically, philosophers identify two types of evil, and therefore two types of suffering. Natural evil describes that which is outside of human control, such as the tragedies and disasters that originate in the natural world. Moral evil, on the other hand, is attributed to human wrongdoing, ignorance or complacency.⁷ C.J. Ducasse extends these distinctions further by identifying four types of evil and suffering: physical, psychological, moral and intellectual. Physical evil describes the pain of physical suffering, such as disease, accidents and even discomfort. Psychological evil describes

⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 24.

⁷ S. Paul Schilling, *God and Human Anguish*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 23.

the pressure of mental torment such as loneliness, anxiety, separation, fear, grief, frustration and insanity. Character defects, or what the Christian church typically considers to be sin, are described as moral evil, such as selfishness, malice, hatred and cruelty. Finally, intellectual evil is characterized by the irrationality, poor judgment and defective perceptions which lead to the mishandling of situations.⁸

Each of these types of evil results in a different type of suffering. Sometimes suffering is found on a purely individual level, such as the psychological pain of mental illness. Silent and hidden from all except the one suffering, their inner battle rages as they are pulled in a myriad of directions between their mind, emotions, spiritual forces, chemical imbalances and the physiological responses, such as the adrenaline surging through their veins.

Other times it can be experienced collectively. Freedom, opportunity, wealth, safety and health can be limited for entire people groups through social forces, which can take on so many forms that any list that attempts to be exhaustive would be as wide as history is long. It may include oppressive social structures, such as the Indian caste system or the American justice system; implicit cultural beliefs such as racism or sexism; cultural norms such as female genital mutilation or child brides; ethnic or political conflicts that cause the victimization of innocent people, such as the recruitment of child soldiers or the use of rape as a weapon of war; and so much more. When suffering is caused by cultural and structural injustices, entire people groups suffer together, creating a dynamic that is quite unique from individual suffering. Andrew Park describes this through the Korean concept of *han*: “*Han* is the inexpressibly entangled experience of

⁸ C.J. Ducasse, *A Philosophical Scrutiny of Religion*, (New York, NY: Ronald Press, 1953), 24.

pain and bitterness imposed by the injustice of oppressors . . . Social injustice, political repression, economic exploitation, cultural contempt and war, all of which affect the downtrodden as a whole, raise the collective *han*.”⁹

Sometimes suffering can take the form of a complicated web of victimization and culpability, as victims become perpetrators and perpetrators become victims. In June of 2015, hundreds of people across Baltimore city took to rioting, rampant looting and burning buildings in protest against the death of an innocent African American youth who died at the hands of the police. Years of marginalization and victimization caused people to snap in desperation and they themselves became perpetrators, destroying the community around them and threatening the safety, infrastructure and businesses of their neighbors.

In fact, the earth itself experiences suffering. In 2010, the BP oil spill caused 170 million gallons of oil to flood into the Gulf of Mexico. More than 8,000 birds, sea turtles and marine mammals such as dolphins were found injured or dead in the wake of the spill.¹⁰ No human life was lost in the accident, yet the suffering experienced by the animal life and the damage done to the earth is undeniable and must also be addressed when dealing with the issue of suffering.

⁹ Andrew Sung Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective*, (Eugene, OR: Orbis Books, 1996), 9.

¹⁰ National Wildlife Federation, “How Does the BP Oil Spill Impact Wildlife and Habitat?” National Wildlife Federation, accessed online September 15, 2015 at <http://www.nwf.org/What-We-Do/Protect-Habitat/Gulf-Restoration/Oil-Spill/Effects-on-Wildlife.aspx>.

Abrahamic Religions: Judaism and Islam

Both Judaism and Islam, along with Christianity, are foundationally monotheistic and consider Abraham to be the father of both their religion and their bloodline. Judaism and Christianity descended from the lineage of Isaac and Islam from Ishmael. Each of the three religions believes that a loving God created the universe and reveals His will through the prophets. These revelations are captured in a holy book of Scripture: the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an. Yet all three traditions differ in their conception of God's nature as well as in their response to suffering. The Theological Foundation paper covers the Christian view, and below is a discussion of the Jewish and Muslim perspectives on suffering.

Judaism

In a practical sense, many ancient Jews believed that the righteous would be rewarded with blessing and the wicked would experience curse and misfortune. This was evident in the insistence of Job's friends on the idea that he must have sinned in order to cause his great suffering. Yet suffering is not always attributed to God's wrath and Israel had a deep tradition of lament. The Hebrew Scriptures are not consistent in dealing with the issue of suffering. Daniel Harrington classifies the way the Hebrew Scriptures represent suffering into five key themes: (1) lament, (2) the law of retribution, (3) suffering as mystery, as in the book of Job, (4) suffering and sacrifice, and (5) the apocalyptic solution.¹¹

¹¹ Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering: A Theological Conversation Across the Ages*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2011), 31, 20.

Deuteronomy 27 and 28 describe the blessings for following God's commands and the curses that would result from disobedience. This passage forms one of the clear Old Testament bases for the concept of suffering as retribution. This paradigm regards good fortune to be a product of righteousness and suffering to be the result of unfaithfulness to the covenant that Israel made with God. Even at the corporate level, the fate of Israel itself was linked to the people's faithfulness to their covenant with God.

Most ancient Hebrews did not have a concept of the afterlife, so the blessing or curse was linked to the present world. Various prophets and passages from the wisdom literature also underscore this belief and they attributed Israel's infidelity as the cause of God's anger and their defeat to their enemies.¹²

Islam

At its core, Islam defines itself as a monotheistic religion –though it differs from Judaism and Christianity in that the one true God is Allah, not Jehovah– which descended from father Abraham, who is considered to be the first major prophet. Muslims believe in many of the Scriptural stories and they see Jesus as a servant to God and the fourth major prophet, but do not believe that He was God. Living in submission to the will of Allah is the foundation of Islam, and they believe Allah's will was recorded in the Qur'an by the Prophet Muhammed, who is seen as the last major prophet and the one to put clarity and definition to the religion, distinguishing it from its cousin religions Judaism and Christianity. In this life, Muslims believe that it is their duty to steward (or *caliph*) the earth and the forward momentum is toward an eventual caliphate that they believe will be

¹² Ryan, *God and the Mystery*, 21-22.

established on the earth. At that time, everyone will be Muslim and the earth will live in peace and harmony. It is very similar to the concept of Christ's reign after the second coming.

With regard to suffering, the Muslim view is very similar to the Jewish view in that the Qur'an promises reward for those who submit to the divine will and punishment for those who do not. Intention (*niyyah*) and effort (*jihad*) are two important concepts for Muslims, as they believe that God is compassionate and reads one's heart and the effort that they make toward obedience and stewardship. They believe that there are two levels of divine judgment: one in history and one at the end of time. Throughout history, they believe that Allah's justice is seen in the fact that a just society will be strong and flourishing, while an oppressive society will eventually be destroyed. Sodom and Gomorrah were examples of divine justice to the Muslims. The second form of justice expected by the Muslims is at the end of the age, when reward and punishment will be distributed on the basis of one's intention and effort toward creating a caliphate that reflects the will Allah.¹³

In the interim period between now and the Day of Judgment, Muslims believe in an afterlife where those who have committed grievous offenses go to a place of punishment, much like hell, and those who have been faithful will receive luxurious rewards in heaven. The nature of the punishment and rewards has been speculated across various Muslim people groups, and some groups imagine this to include seventy two virgins, though scholars disagree with this interpretation.¹⁴

¹³ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 167-171.

¹⁴ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 173.

Both Islam and Judaism fail to offer a sufficient framework for explaining why innocent people suffer. One does not have to walk the earth very long to notice that often righteous people suffer and the wicked prosper.

Indian Religions: Hinduism and Buddhism

While there are great contrasts between Hinduism and Buddhism, both religions were birthed in India and share some common underlying paradigms. First, rather than believing that a divine being began a religion or communicated a truth, Indian traditions began with humans who were able to effectively alter their perception of reality in order to achieve a state of enlightenment or peace. No standard belief as to whether or not there is a God exists; some believe in a god or gods, while others are atheists. However, when there are gods, these are usually sources of comfort and assistance rather than operating as rulers of the universe. Thus, the concept of orthodoxy is less emphasized in Indian religions than it is in Abrahamic religions, as close adherence to a divinely inspired set of doctrines is less important than finding a set of behaviors, practices or thought patterns that works effectively to allow an individual to achieve the desired state of consciousness. Thus there are many ways to achieving enlightenment and each person can find the path that is best for their own journey. Furthermore, these religions seek to understand and live in accordance with the laws of the natural and/or supernatural world, rather than focusing on following the laws of a particular God. Evil, then, is seen not as a force that operates in opposition to a good God but as an essential part of the nature of reality. Justice against evil is not administered by a deity but is found in the natural balance of the universe. This balance is found through reincarnation, which is the belief that a soul is born over and

over in different forms as they work out their own *karma*, or destiny which is determined by their actions in this life and previous lives. Finally, Indian religions consider reality to be illusory, or *maya*, and a major goal of seeking enlightenment is to understand or “wake up” to the true nature of reality, which is the source of happiness.¹⁵

Hinduism

Significant variations are united under the umbrella of Hinduism, as it may range from polytheistic, monotheistic, atheistic, pacifist, aggressive, meat-eating, meatless, or animal sacrificing. The term Hinduism was adopted when India became a colony and referred to all non-Muslims living east of the Indus River. In general, a common characteristic of Hindu religions is that of reincarnation, a characteristic which is stressed more in Hinduism than Buddhism. Suffering is perceived to be the result of poor *karma*, where bad actions produce bad consequences through the law of cause and effect. Thus life, then, is the working out of one’s *karma* and seeking to improve it in order to achieve a better state in a future life.¹⁶

The goal of this cycle of rebirths is to eventually be released from it, or *moksha*, which occurs when one is able to reach enlightenment, which is defined as freedom from attachment to material things. This enlightenment is achieved when one is able to fully realize the true nature of self and reality, that the *Atman*, or True Self, is one with the *Brahman*, or Ultimate Reality. Through practicing and perfecting meditation, adherents can increase their awareness of this illusory nature of the material world and reach that

¹⁵ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 207-208.

¹⁶ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 209.

state of enlightenment. Sometimes this ultimate reality is seen as a metaphysical principle, while other times it is seen as a personal god or gods. As they increase their consciousness and do good deeds, they work off their bad *karma* and move closer and closer to *moksha* or release from the cycles of life.¹⁷

Hinduism has developed through history into India's social, legal and moral structure. The belief that one's life is the result of *karma* led to the rise of social structures such as the *varna* and caste system. These systems (*varna* being scripturally mandated and castes being sociological) are essentially founded on the idea that those who are at the lowest levels deserve to be so because they are reaping natural consequences. Suffering, then, is caused by one's own failures, even if these actions were conducted not by oneself now but rather in one's past life. Thus, situations that can be perceived as injustice are explained as the natural outworking of the laws of the universe.¹⁸

The theory of reincarnation covers any questions about the unjustness of suffering, yet the concept that one is somehow paying for the sins of an unknown or unconscious past life seems imaginative at best, oppressive at worst. No indication in nature or physics shows that life is circular. While it is true that energy can shift its form, transforming from visible light to kinetic movement to unseen heat, and is never gained nor lost, this energy can be clearly traced and predictably measured as it shifts and moves. Each individual is unique to each other, and there is no indication that a soul shifts forms like energy. A soul, at least defined in the Christian sense, is made up of the mind, will and

¹⁷ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 215-219.

¹⁸ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 223-224.

emotions. If a baby's soul was not a new one, they would come in with memories or knowledge from past lives. If a soul is on a trajectory working toward *moksha* then certainly the progress made in one life would be seen in the next, especially with regard to an ability to meditate or perform the behaviors that lead to the end goal of enlightenment and detachment. Status, wealth, health or happiness has no logical link to *karma*, either in this life or a past life, in order for bad *karma* to hold up as a cogent argument for the existence of suffering.

Beyond the logic of the worldview, the belief in *karma* and reincarnation has caused the oppression of an entire people group. In traditional Indian society the lowest social class, called the *dalit* or the untouchables, were considered to be outside the caste system and were systematically discriminated against with regard to vocation, income, access to schools and temples, as well as food and water. Interaction with them was considered to be polluting and they were forced into segregated and impoverished living conditions. Mahatma Gandhi fought to free them and thankfully in the early 1950's this system was abolished. At the time there had been 170 million people living as untouchables.¹⁹ Still, progress in improving their social class has been slow.

Bad deeds in a past life cannot be justification for oppressing an entire group of people. Thankfully the government of modern India has not retained this practice, but it is evidence that the concepts of reincarnation and enlightenment have not produced good fruit in the life of Indians.

¹⁹ "Untouchable: Hindu Social Class," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016, accessed online January 8, 2016 at <http://www.britannica.com/topic/untouchable>.

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded in India in the sixth century BCE, as Siddhartha Gautama searched for a response to the suffering that he observed in the world. The story of the Buddha is that Siddhartha had grown up as a prince and became curious about what was outside of the palace walls. He took four rides: on the first night, he encountered a sick man; on the second night, he saw an old man; on the third, a dead man; and on the fourth, a holy man who had renounced all possessions. These sights posed such riddle to him that he became like that holy man that he saw on the fourth night and searched for the answer to suffering. Yet after years of asceticism, he found himself no wiser than he began and decided to live the Middle Way, which was to eat and drink just as much as was needed with no more or less. Then he finally sat under a sacred Bodhi tree, and did not arise until he had found the answer to suffering. Legend has it that when he rose, he proclaimed “I am the Buddha!”²⁰

Buddhism is similar to Hinduism in that it affirms a belief in the natural justice of the universe, the cycle of rebirths, and the goal of achieving enlightenment to escape this cycle. After Siddhartha’s quest, he developed what is called the Four Noble Truths. While there are many variations found around the world, these four pillars form the foundation of the religion and unite the various expressions of theistic and nontheistic Buddhism. These are:

1. Life is suffering. In essence, one is born, lives and dies in suffering. Buddhists use the word *dukkha* to describe this condition, which literally means a bone or axle

²⁰ Kreeft, *Making Sense*, 1-3.

that is out of its socket, broken, or alienated from itself. Sometimes *dukkha* can also be translated as dissatisfaction.

2. Desire is the cause of suffering. To a Buddhist, suffering is created when a desire is unmet, causing a rift or separation between the desire itself and the fulfillment of that desire. They call this *tanha*, which means greed, craving or selfishness.
3. Ending desire will end suffering. If, in its essence, suffering is caused by an unmet desire, then if one desires nothing, they will not suffer. Seeking to end suffering by satisfying a desire will never succeed, as it can never fully be satisfied. Instead, decreasing the desire is the only way to truly find peace. *Nirvana*, which means extinction, is the state of being free from desire and derives from the Sanskrit word meaning “to cool,” such as in the blowing out of the fire of earthly passions.
4. *Nirvana* can be achieved through the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhists divide life into eight aspects where a disciple gradually releases, simplifies and purifies his or her desires and takes on right views, hopes, speech, action, living, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Essentially this is a process of ego reduction which takes a lifetime of devotion to complete.²¹

Buddhists tend to be acutely in tune with the suffering in the world and consider it to be an inevitable part of life. Yet the source of that suffering is identified to be within the sufferer himself and not in any tragedy or evil force. Henepola Gunaratana identifies two fundamental causes for suffering: one is greed and the second is ignorance.

Nobody is born with a big smile; everybody is born with a big cry. Why do we cry? We cry not only because we are separated from our mother's comfortable

²¹ Morreall, *Religion Toolkit*, 232.

womb but because we are thrust into this world, and at that moment we start crying. This crying about our human condition continues all our life. . . The truth is that no matter what we use to stop the crying, the suffering of our lives continues due to the fact that we do not understand it. . . Our inner cry has two causes. One is what we call in Buddhism an insatiable greed. By greed, we mean that there is something in us that is never satisfied. . . The second is even more important. We call it ignorance. We don't know what it is that makes us so dissatisfied. . . We Buddhists believe that our dissatisfaction, our unhappiness, our inner cry exists because of what we call clinging of attachment to self. . . Then with an understanding of our false self, we can begin letting go of that self. In letting go of this attachment to self, with all the related worries about ourselves and our unhealthy reactions to the world around us, we can begin to minimize our unhappiness. This letting go is what we call generosity.²²

Those who practice Buddhism find healing in the space, or peace, that is left behind after they have practiced separation. Buddhists seek to both extinguish and transform suffering. Extinguishing suffering is an internal dynamic and is achieved through the practice of meditation and monastic training. In the Zen tradition, this is achieved through the careful consideration of a series of paradoxes, which are intended to bypass the intellectual processes and illuminate other aspects of intuitive consciousness. Transformational suffering, in contrast, is focused on the outside world though caring for others in order to find peace in one's own suffering condition. For example, when a sick person cares for another person who is sick, they no longer focus on their own sickness and are able to find peace in their own condition.²³

Yet while sometimes suffering can indeed be caused by one's perception or unhealthy desires, certainly this is not the cause of all suffering. A child suffering from malnutrition or malaria cannot be blamed for their own suffering, as if their desire for food and health is a selfish attachment. Furthermore, the process of detachment and the

²² Donald W. Mitchell, *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 7-8.

²³ Mitchell, *Transforming Suffering*, 11-14.

search for transformational suffering cannot truly provide an answer for suffering.

Finding acceptance of one's own suffering and connectedness in reaching out to others who are suffering does not lift anyone out of that which is causing the suffering. Instead this approach seeks to find peace within the suffering, yet inherent to this suffering experience is a lack of peace. Such is the paradox described by the Zen. Peter Kreeft observes that in a sense, detachment is a form of spiritual euthanasia which kills the patient in order to cure the disease.²⁴ Desire and emotion are not inherently selfish, and in the process of killing one's desires, one cannot come away without also killing a piece of oneself. Thus this is not a satisfactory answer to the problem of suffering.

Chinese Religions: Taoism and Confucianism

The ancient Chinese believed that the natural world was governed by two opposite forces: yin and yang. This concept of bipolarity formed a foundation for understanding all things: light and dark, hot and cold, war and peace. Yin describes the passive, receptive aspect of life and encompasses the feminine essence as well as negativity, coldness, darkness and death. Yang, then, describes the active and the masculine and includes aggression, heat and light. Everything in life exists in the balance or on a continuum between these two extremes. Both Taoism and Confucianism include this concept of opposites and in Chinese culture and they are considered to be complementary. Taoism is yin-oriented while Confucianism is yang-oriented.²⁵

²⁴ Kreeft, *Making Sense*, 4.

²⁵ Jeaneane Fowler, *An Introduction to the Philosophy and Religion of Taoism: Pathways to Immortality*, (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 66-69.

Taoism

In practice, due to the way they coexisted in the history and development of China, it is difficult to separate Taoism from Buddhism and Confucianism. This syncretism has occurred to such a deep level that it is often difficult to define Taoism. While the term Tao is used in various contexts in Chinese culture, it represents a sense of ultimate Reality as well as the Way to return to that reality. Taoism as a religion is loosely comprised of two sects: Taochia/Daojia, which is an earlier philosophical form, and Tao-chiao/Daojiao, which is a later ritualistic form.²⁶

Suffering is not a primary focus for Taoists except in its relation to yin and yang. Yin is seen as a womb from which yang emerges, or the darkness from which comes the light. This is symbolized by the ascent that occurs after a depth is experienced, and the day that progresses from the night. In the same way that darkness and light both exist during each day, suffering is seen as a natural part of life and as something to be accepted as part of the universe's balance. The response then, to the Taoist, is to surf the tide and ride the wave of experience until the balance shifts away from suffering and toward prosperity. Resisting suffering is seen to cause more suffering. This is called *wu*, or action through inaction.

While, similarly to Buddhism, acceptance may bring some relief from suffering, it quickly breaks down in the face of the world's worst forms of suffering. A woman who has experienced serious complications in childbirth, who is ostracized by her family and community after excrement involuntarily and indiscriminately flows through an obstetric fistula, cannot recover simply by riding the wave of the balance of the universe.

²⁶ Randall L. Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective*, (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 62-67.

Communities that have been scattered in South Sudan, hiding in the bushes and scrounging for morsels of food as both the government and opposition forces inflict terror, mass rape, torture and death of innocent people, cannot find refuge in inaction against suffering.

Confucianism

Confucius, or K'ung Fu-tzu which was his real Chinese name, lived 500 years before Christ and was a teacher from among a class of scribes. He taught that the social order and class structure depended on education rather than birth or wealth. He did not make a huge impact on society or the rulers during his time and it is said that his life ended in disappointment and ineffectiveness. However, his ideas were later accepted and became the foundation of Chinese society. As his ideas were compiled and expanded, he became a role model and later was deified. By the end of the first century BCE he was being worshipped, and in AD 59 the Emperor formalized this by decreeing that sacrifices could and should be offered to Confucius.²⁷

The central interest of Confucianism is that of humanism and ethical social living more than the concepts of afterlife, religious ritual, scriptures or deity. The Analects, which is a collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius, focus heavily on the development of honor and understanding. Proper behavior would bring order to society and anyone could be a “superior man” or “gentleman” by becoming noble, unselfish, kind and just. Suffering then, is seen as a means toward understanding:

Those who are possessed of understanding from birth are the highest type of people. Those who understand things only after studying them are of the next

²⁷ Jeaneane Fowler, *Philosophy and Religion of Taoism*, 30-32.

lower type, and those who learn things from painful experience are the next. Those who have painful experiences but do not learn from them are the lowest types of people.²⁸

While it is true that suffering can serve as a source of growth, and that some forms of adversity may be minimized in a peaceful and just society, Confucianism does not provide a truly transformative answer for the sinfulness of the human heart. As many times as it produces strength, suffering can also produce a deep bitterness and anger that no sense of outward nobility or uprightness can heal. Difficulty in processing through an experience may not be due to the lowness of the individual but to the depth and intensity of the suffering. The Confucian view may share a similarity to the Jewish concept of divine punishment in that those who experience the most suffering may bear the added burden of being blamed for their difficulty in processing through that suffering in a positive way. Furthermore, an ordered society may relieve some forms of suffering, such as crime or violence, but many other forms, such as sickness or death, remain unanswered.

Conclusion

As described above, none of the six major world religions provide a comprehensive answer to the problem of suffering. Each provides a perspective that works well in some cases, but they fall short in providing an answer for everyone and the myriad forms of suffering that one may experience. The Jewish and Muslim views of retribution for sin work well when suffering is indeed caused by sin, but not all tribulation is caused by sin. The Hindu concept of reincarnation provides a sense of

²⁸ Confucius, "Analects 16:9." *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources*. Deborah Sommer, Ed., Transl., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 43.

justice, but does not provide an explanation for why bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Relief can be found in the Buddhist concept of detachment, but desire is not inherently a bad thing and in separating from desire one may end up separating from themselves. Finally, the Taoist and Confucian concepts of balance and acceptance may also bring peace in the moment of turmoil, but do not provide a lasting answer to the deep pains and injustices experienced by humanity.

A comprehensive and lasting understanding of how peace and joy can be found in suffering is only provided from within a Christian worldview. Chapter Five will lay out the way Christian theologians have understood suffering throughout history and provide a framework for responding to difficult times.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Though the pain that is so inherent to the human experience exists around, within, and even through every person who lives on the earth, it is often difficult to understand and reconcile within oneself and in one's relationship with God. This difficulty can occur regardless of whether the cause seems simple, such as a diagnosis of a terminal disease, or complex like systemic injustice. Christians, who believe in a good and omnipotent God, may wrestle with this the most in attempting to reconcile the love and promises of God with the confusing and painful realities that present themselves every day. Jurgen Moltmann, a Protestant theologian who lived in Germany during World War II, saw suffering as "the rock of atheism" in that the suffering of innocent people radically challenges the concept of a just and loving God.¹ As such, it is vital for every believer to grapple with the existence of suffering and evil.

Despite the fact that it is such an inherent and important part of the human experience, many do not have a clear practical and operational theology of suffering. Intellectual and theological frameworks often break down in the face of real life tragedies and many may find that in times of struggle, what they actually believe is different from

¹ Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering: A Theological Conversation Across the Ages*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2011), 196.

what they thought they believed. They lose sight of the God that they thought was good, and sometimes find confusion and despair in its wake. Peter Kreeft acknowledges that believing in a good and omnipotent God does not make the problem of suffering easier; indeed it makes it worse. “For how can an all-powerful and all-loving God allow his innocent babies to suffer? That is the problem; not just suffering but the scandal of suffering in a God-made and God-ruled universe.”²

Missionaries may experience this disconnect even more so because they are on the front lines of most social problems existing in the world today. They seek out the lost, broken and marginalized. In bringing God’s love to those who are suffering, they themselves taste of that suffering in a unique way. It is therefore all the more imperative that missionaries form a coherent theology of suffering, for if they do not, they may become a casualty of well-doing through burnout and disappointment.

Theodicy: God and Human Suffering

Christians agree that in Jesus, God became man and experienced suffering. He loved the world so much that He Himself not only took on the painfulness of humanity, but paid the ultimate price for sin so that all who desired could be free from sin and death. Since then, Christians have lived in the tension between the kingdom to come and the kingdom that is now. Each believer looks forward toward heaven with joy; a place of no more pain and no more sorrow. Yet in the meantime, Jesus was clear that His followers were to expect suffering in this life until the time when He comes again and the earth is made new. In this space between the cross and the second coming, theologians have

² Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 17.

attempted to develop frameworks of understanding to explain the various logical and spiritual issues related to suffering. These explanations are called theodicies, and attempt to reconcile how a good and omnipotent God can exist in the face of evil and suffering.³

Theodicies pervade the church in conscious and sometimes unconscious ways. Yet during times of sorrow, often any explanation seems to fall short of capturing the gravity and depth of suffering. People who are going through difficulty may not want theories, but “a listening ear, a sympathetic touch, something in the way of concrete, practical assistance.”⁴ Elizabeth Johnson takes a very critical approach toward the development of theodicies or rational frameworks to understand suffering. To Johnson, “the most astute theodicies pale before the depth of torment in the history of the world. Evil is indeed the *surd*⁵ which shatters every rational system of thought.”⁶ Karl Barth was distrustful of theodicies as well and while others have searched for implicit clues regarding his thoughts, he intentionally refrained from developing a formal framework. He did not believe that God and evil were remotely equal factors that required any reconciliation, for he saw it to be humanity which needs justification, not God. Instead he writes, “as far as possible I would like to avoid mentioning God and the devil in the same breath.”⁷

³ *Theodicy* is a term coined by Gottfried Leibniz in the seventeenth century. It combines the Greek words for “justify” (*dikaioō*) and “God” (*theos*) and literally means to justify God with regard to the presence of evil.

⁴ Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 21.

⁵ Johnson defines *surd* as evil which “is an irrational force that cannot be made to fit meaningfully into a definite plan for the world.” (Ryan, *God and the Mystery*, 283).

⁶ Ryan, *God and the Mystery*, 283.

⁷ R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), 1-3.

Yet in spite of this, one's underlying, often unconscious, understanding of where God can be found in relation to suffering greatly impacts the way it is experienced. What is the cause? Is it God? Oneself? Is possible to really identify a cause at all? Can goodness be seen as a result of suffering, or does it just bring loss and destruction? Is it to be embraced merely as a difficult catalyst in the journey to glory, or is it to be resisted as the work of the enemy? As Wendy Farley writes, "the way we interpret suffering has a great deal to do with how we experience suffering. . . . Amid the assaults of suffering, the survival of meaningfulness is intrinsic to the resistance of suffering."⁸

The Bible is clear not only that suffering does exist, but that the people of God will surely taste of it. Douglas Hall asserts that "it would not be an exaggeration of the earnestness of this [Christian] tradition's commitment to realism to say that the reality of human suffering is the thing to which biblical faith clings most insistently."⁹ Almost every biblical story touches on the subject of suffering in one way or another. Yet there is not one consistent source, purpose or response to suffering that would serve as a distinct framework for understanding it. As previously discussed, suffering and evil are not synonymous, but suffering is a type of evil and such theodicies need to explain the existence of evil in order to explain suffering. Central to these theodicies are the concepts of God's sovereignty and man's free will.

While some theologians search for a model that will provide the final clarity on this ancient question, each explanation falls short in its ability to apply to every scenario.

⁸ Wendy Farley, "The Practice of Theodicy," *Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine and Faith*, Margaret E. Mohrmann and Mark J. Hanson, eds, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 103-104.

⁹ Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 27.

Furthermore, the Bible itself does not suggest that there is any one unique source of suffering, even when two scenarios may appear to be similar.

Consider, for example, the existence of a storm. At face value this is a natural phenomenon. Evaporation and rising air causes water-laden clouds to form in the sky. When an area with low atmospheric pressure collides with a high pressure system, the resulting disturbance releases the excess water from the clouds in the form precipitation. Yet while this is a physical explanation for the storm, the underlying spiritual cause of a storm, as well as the subsequent response, was very different for Jonah than it was for Jesus' disciples in Matthew 8.

In the book of Jonah, Jonah was running from God because he did not want to obey God's instruction to prophesy to the people of Ninevah. Instead he boarded a boat on the way to Tarshish and on his journey the sailors experienced a storm so strong that they feared for their lives. Jonah knew that his disobedience was the reason for the storm and when the crew threw him overboard, the storm stopped. Jonah 1:11-15 describes the account as follows:

Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. [Jonah] said to them, "pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." . . . So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

In contrast to the Jonah account, Jesus and the disciples encountered a storm that caused them also to fear for their lives. Matthew 8:23-27, with parallel accounts in Mark 4 and Luke 8, describes the account and says that when the disciples feared for their lives, they awoke Jesus for help. Rather than pointing to anyone's sin, Jesus rebuked them for having a lack of faith and then calmed the storm. In this case, the purpose was not to

correct any course of events or disobedience but to demonstrate the power of the Son of God.

While the disciples found themselves in the exact same situation as Jonah, if they had interpreted their storm through the lens of Jonah's story, they would have been vastly incorrect. This interpretation would have then impacted their response and caused them to repent before God instead of focusing their faith and trust in the power of God. The alternate course of events in this scenario can only be speculative but it is possible that if the disciples focused their energy on repenting and looking inward, as Job did, rather than looking upward toward the Lord, that they would have missed what God was doing in the storm.

In consistency with the example of the storm, acknowledging that suffering may come from various different sources brings an opportunity in each case to ask the Lord about the source and response for a particular difficulty or suffering. Depending on the source, then, the response and responsibility of the believer would be completely different. After careful prayer, consideration and inquiry into the wisdom of mature believers, it is the position of this paper that there are four different overall sources for suffering. These are as follows:

1. Sin, whether one's own or others. Suffering that results from sin is evident in the consequences for one's own poor decisions, in the victims who suffer at the hands of violence, hatred or theft, and other times in the form of separation from God's peace through belief in untruths.

2. Satan, who comes to steal, to kill and to destroy. This is particularly seen in cases where Satan may attempt to bring temptation or throw a roadblock with the goal of thwarting God's plan.
3. God, whose plan and nature is always good. Sometimes when approaching an event through a temporal lens, it may seem terrible but in time God's good purpose for it is revealed, often in the form of correction, instruction or redemption.
4. Natural events. While the storms described above were caused by either Jonah's sin or God's demonstration of power, not every natural disaster can be attributed to the other three identified causes. Sometimes tragedies occur in a broken world under the weight of general, not any specific, sin.

Each of these four sources can be associated with theodicies that have been suggested by theologians as an answer to the problem of suffering. While each theodicy may fall short in providing a framework for every circumstance, when taken together they provide a more holistic understanding of the diversity of human suffering.

The greatest gift ever to be given is the way God cares for and engages with mere humans. Thus it is a privilege in each situation for the believer to go to God in prayer in order to discern how they are to respond in each particular situation. The following sections describe these four identified sources of suffering in greater detail and identify the various theodicies associated with each. Each section also describes the implications for believers in terms of how God's goodness is manifest and what the response and responsibility of the individual would be in each situation.

Suffering Caused by God: Perfect Plan, Soul-Making and Redemptive Suffering

The Bible shows clear examples where God did indeed bring calamity or suffering upon people, including His own people: God commands the Israelites to exterminate all of the Canaanites, including innocent women and children (1 Samuel 15:2-3); God brings destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:13); God not only allowed but encouraged Satan to torment Job (Job 1:6-12); and even the Psalmist cried out that God has afflicted him, and it is good (Psalm 119:75). The writer of Lamentations clearly links his suffering to God's hand and determines to praise God in spite of it:

I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. . . But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' (Lamentations 3:1-9, 22-24, ESV)

Four major theodicies are associated with the concept that God is the source of suffering: Perfect Plan Theodicy, Soul-Making Theodicy, Redemptive Suffering, and Punishment Theodicy. The first three focus on reconciling suffering with goodness, and the latter associates suffering with judgment.

Perfect Plan Theodicy

Perfect Plan Theodicy, a name coined by Richard Rice, is the idea that everything which occurs on this earth—even each seemingly insignificant detail, both good and bad—is God's will and fits into His perfect plan. Even though a difficult event or circumstance may seem confusing now, God has a purpose for it and His goodness will be seen in the

end. Another related theodicy is the Soul-Making Theodicy. Perfect Plan Theodicy holds that suffering is a part of God's good plan in general, and Soul-Making Theodicy identifies that goodness in its effect on strengthening the sufferer as they overcome the obstacles.

While many Christian traditions throughout history have believed in the concept of God's ultimate sovereignty, one of the major early roots of Perfect Plan Theodicy is the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Augustine believed that God's sovereignty was so absolute that no other force could cause anything to occur other than that which was God's will. While he acknowledges that God grants free will, Augustine believed that that free will was already accounted for in God's plan through His foreknowledge. He wrote that:

Absolutely all bodies are subject to the will of God; as, indeed, are all wills, too, since they have no power save what He gave them. Thus, God is the Cause of all things - a cause that makes but is not made. . . Our wills have power to do all that God wanted them to do and foresaw they could do.¹⁰

Further, with regard to suffering, Augustine wrote that "whatever a man has to suffer against his will is not to be attributed to the choices of man or of angels or of any created spirit, but to His choice who gives to wills whatever power they have."¹¹ To Augustine, since God created all things including evil, Hicks summarizes Augustine's stance as asserting that "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist."¹²

¹⁰ Saint Augustine, *The City of God: An Abridged Version*, Vernon J. Bourke, ed., Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan and Daniel J. Honan, transl., (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958), 108.

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 110.

¹² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 176.

John Calvin also held to this view, as the concept of predestination and God's absolute sovereignty was central to Calvinist theology. Calvin believed that God predestined every event that occurs on the earth. Predestination and Perfect Plan theodicy are almost two sides of the same coin, and Calvin defines predestination as "the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man."¹³ With regard to suffering and injustice, he wrote that "carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips . . . will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan."¹⁴

Brother Lawrence, a monk who lived in the sixteenth century, also held to Perfect Plan Theodicy and eloquently described the emotional response to suffering in light of the belief that everything is God's will. He wrote that:

God knows best what we need and everything He does is for our good. If we knew how much He loves us, we would always be ready to receive from Him, with equanimity, the sweet and the bitter, and even the most painful and difficult things would be pleasing and agreeable . . . When we believe that it is the hand of God acting on us, that it is a Father filled with love who subjects us to this humiliation, grief and suffering then all bitterness . . . is forgotten and we rejoice in them. We must believe unquestioningly that . . . it is pleasing to God to sacrifice ourselves to Him, that it is by His divine Providence that we are abandoned to all kinds of conditions, to suffer all kinds of sufferings, miseries and temptations.¹⁵

To Augustine, Calvin and Lawrence, suffering and pain come from God because all things come from God. Those who experience it must embrace it as God's will and

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Revised Ed. Henry Beveridge, transl., (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 201.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 198-199.

¹⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (Garden City, NY: Image, 1977) 95-96, 100.

offer themselves as willing sacrifices to God's goodness as expressed in that very suffering. Furthermore, to Lawrence it is through accepting and embracing this suffering that it ceases to be painful and allows God's goodness to be seen in and through it. Lawrence saw God's hand not only in working all things together for good, but that He intended and foreordained each difficult event for the very reason of bringing about the good results.

This poses questions about the nature of God's goodness and Oswald Chambers, a popular preacher who held to this theodicy, further explains this seeming paradox in his July 16 entry:

At times God will appear like an unkind friend, but He is not; He will appear like an unnatural father, but He is not; He will appear like an unjust judge, but He is not. Keep the thought that the mind of God is behind all things strong and growing. Not even the smallest detail of life happens unless God's will is behind it. Therefore, you can rest in perfect confidence in Him.¹⁶

The issue of God appearing like an unkind father is a serious one for those who hold to Perfect Plan Theodicy. For someone who is experiencing an acute crisis or severe tragedy, consoling them with the idea that God meant it for good can feel vague and unsatisfying at best, or confusing and infuriating at worst. Furthermore, Perfect Plan theodicy does not account for suffering due to sinful acts, which would certainly not be God's will. The Bible is clear that God granted mankind free will when He created them in God's image. Second Peter 3:9 says that "the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." This verse is clear that God desires that all people would be saved. Yet sadly not all are indeed saved, which implies that the world does not always operate

¹⁶ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour and Company, 1963), 197.

according to what God would plan. This is a big problem for Perfect Plan theodicy, as salvation is not a small detail; it is the very reason that Christ came to earth to suffer and die for the world's sins.

A related theodicy, which accounts for sin but still argues that suffering comes from God and is attributed to His goodness, is called Soul-Making Theodicy. This theodicy focuses on what sort of good God is able to produce from suffering: growth of character. This defense differs from Perfect Plan Theodicy in some of its major underlying paradigms, as described below.

Soul-Making Theodicy and Redemptive Suffering

Augustine believed that the fall of man in the Garden of Eden introduced sin and brokenness into the world. This concept of original sin has become the foundation of many commonly held theodicies. Yet John Hick argues that the Irenaean approach, which forms the foundation of the Soul-Making Theodicy, offers a better answer to the problem of suffering.

Irenaeus lived during the sub-apostolic age, toward the end of the second century between the time of the biblical writers and the establishment of the ecclesiastical dogmas. This was before the established church formally adopted Augustine's view of original sin, and Irenaeus' ideas were largely forgotten until recently. Irenaeus saw Adam and Eve's sin not as a revolt against God, which resulted in the damnation and depravity of humankind, but as a mistake made by weak and vulnerable children. Life itself, then, is a process of growing and maturing, with suffering and challenges serving as an

essential catalyst for growth. Through the experience of both good and evil, humankind is being taught to choose goodness.¹⁷

While Irenaeus did not formally develop a theodicy, as did Augustine, theologians have used his idea as a foundation for the Soul-Making Theodicy. Suffering is seen as necessary means for reach one's full potential and becoming everything they are meant to be. Rice describes this view using the analogy of a muscle, that in the same way that it takes resistance for one's muscles to grow, it takes resistance for souls to grow.¹⁸ Hick observes that this theodicy is consistent with the contemporary idea of evolution and sees humankind to be evolving and maturing along with nature itself. Soul-Making Theodicy looks not toward the past, in an effort to return to the pre-Fall state of perfection, but looks toward the future for the continued growth and development of humankind.¹⁹

Soul-Making theodicy both in that it is not necessarily the depravity of humans that causes the suffering, but the fact that God created man and woman not as finitely perfect but finitely immature and imperfect. Hick argues that God did not create humans to be perfect in their original state because that would not have allowed space for free will.²⁰ Thus, like the Perfect Plan Theodicy, the Soul-Making view attributes the ultimate responsibility to God, who created the world in its imperfection with His good purposes in mind.

¹⁷ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 208-214.

¹⁸ Rice, *Suffering and the Search*, 67.

¹⁹ John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, Stephen T. Davis, ed., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 39-41.

²⁰ Hick, *Encountering Evil*, 39, 41-42.

While most Christians would not attribute their beliefs to Irenaeus, nor consciously disagree with the concept of original sin, the Soul-Making Theodicy is implicitly evident in some of the popular explanations for suffering. The phrase, “what does not kill you makes you stronger,” is often used to encourage oneself or others during difficult times. Sometimes truly there is fruit that can only be produced by times of pain and loss. The most difficult circumstances can, in the end, be those that are the richest in allowing God to bring good out of evil.

Related to, but distinctly different from, the Soul-Making Theodicy is the Catholic concept of Redemptive Suffering. William O’Malley describes Redemptive Suffering as “accepting –welcoming– the challenge of redemption from my own entropy, my own tendency toward inertia, redemption from my still-active animal roots.”²¹ Like Perfect Plan Theodicy, Redemptive Suffering also finds its roots in the Augustine and it was further developed by Thomas Aquinas. Those who support the idea of Redemptive Suffering believe that as Christians suffer, they are sharing in the suffering of Christ. Just as Christ’s suffering provided restoration for creation, as His followers follow suit in suffering they are likewise participating in the redemptive process. The concept of Redemptive Suffering is able to effectively account for both sin and God’s sovereignty, and identifies a larger purpose for suffering which provides motivation for gaining strength and perseverance during dark times.

Redemptive Suffering would not attribute the world’s brokenness to God, but supporters would agree that suffering is part of God’s plan to redeem a fallen world. Thus both of these theodicies find a balance between Perfect Plan theodicy and the Free Will

²¹ William J. O’Malley, *Redemptive Suffering: Understanding Suffering, Living With It, Growing Through It*, (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 4.

defense, described below. While Perfect Plan explains suffering as God's foreordained providence and Free Will regards it to be the result of humankind's sinful choices, Soul-Making and Redemptive Suffering both promote the idea that suffering is in the good plan of God in order to grow, strengthen or redeem the brokenness or human frailty in oneself and the world around them.

Believing that God is behind all things can be freeing for someone who is faced with confusion or regret; in situations where just taking a different bus would have resulted in a different outcome, or when random, horrific violence seems to find someone who did nothing to provoke it. It was not random; it was a good God who ordained it and intends to use it for His glory. It erases questions of "what if?" or "why?" and can help one to find peace through trusting that God, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, is in control and intends to do something good through the events. In fact, many times it is those who encounter suffering in a deep or traumatic way that hold to this view most strongly.²²

There is also an honest piety that can be found in someone who truly and honestly holds this position. One who not only trusts God in the face of trials and turmoil, but indeed loves and runs to the same God whom they see as the source of their pain. Some dear saints hold to this position and their dedication and trust can be nothing but pleasing to their loving Father.

However, sometimes life brings events that just cannot be reconciled with the theory that God wills and intends all events on the earth. Sometimes goodness does not result from suffering. Oswald Chambers contradicts himself when he describes God as

²² Rice, *Suffering and the Search*, 28.

the source of “all things strong and growing” while at the same time for His will to be behind the smallest details of life. Sometimes circumstances are just utterly broken.

Sometimes no matter how hard someone tries and prays to keep bitterness, jadedness or hardness from setting into their heart, without relief or true healing they can still end up worse for the wear. According to the United Nations, 29,000 children under the age of five die every day (which is 21 children per minute), mainly from preventable causes such as diarrhea and malnutrition.²³ Their suffering did not cause them to be stronger, better people; rather, it denied them life itself. The fruit that is born of some events cannot be considered strong and growing and do not have the mark of God’s goodness.

Punishment Theodicy

Punishment theodicy sees suffering as retribution from God for sin. This concept originates in some of the writings of the Old Testament and was a common Hebrew understanding of suffering, as described above.

Most theologians do not ascribe to this theodicy as a standalone explanation for suffering. O’Malley observes that according to this view, because of the sin of Adam and Eve “there is no way other than torment to appease God for being the progeny of such a pair - even though none of us chose to be born at all. . . . I can’t accept that Jesus submitted to legal murder as a scapegoat to divert God’s wrath from us. I can’t accept a God who waits like a kidnapper for a ransom to be paid.”²⁴

²³ UNICEF, “Millennium Development Goal #4: Reduce Child Mortality,” accessed online May 5, 2015 at <http://www.unicef.org/mdg/childmortality.html>.

²⁴ O’Malley, *Redemptive Suffering*, 18, 108.

Yet the biblical examples cannot be ignored and the idea that suffering could potentially be due to God's judgment must be acknowledged as one possible cause among others.

Response of the Believer when Suffering is caused by God

If all suffering comes from God, whether being part of His perfect plan, a catalyst for human growth, or a punishment for sin, in all three cases it would be imperative to embrace that suffering, as Brother Lawrence suggests. If God is behind something, far be it for mortal man to reject what God is doing. Yet, as much as theologians have tried, some tragedies and injustices cannot be attributed to God as they just do not bear the fruit of His good nature.

In practice, in order to do as Brother Lawrence suggests, a state of complete acceptance could only be achieved by separating oneself emotionally from an event. Proponents of these theodicies may describe this as dying to oneself and embracing the cross. Yet in doing so, one would actually end up with a similar practical theology as the Buddhist, who believes that overcoming suffering involves releasing and detaching oneself from desire and emotion. Embracing the cross and dying to oneself involve turning away from one's old sinful nature and becoming a new person, holy in Christ; it does not mean ceasing to be oneself or squelching the good desires in one's heart. Psalm 37:4 says to "delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." This verse does not say that God will necessarily give one the object of their heart's desires, but the desire itself. Even though struggles and trials do happen, God does not will that His people become repressed or dampened versions of themselves.

Sadly, the concept that God is the cause of suffering –or even that He would just allow it by ceasing to implement His sovereign ability to stop it– has caused many to lose their faith in God altogether. It is often those with the softest heart for the broken and afflicted that may walk away from a loving God due to their understanding of His role, or lack of intervention, in the midst of tragedy. Richard Rice asserts that:

Quite often, suffering forces people to change their views about God – sometimes dramatically. . . . Suffering can be a great obstacle to faith. When people don't believe in God, more often than not, the number one reason they give is the suffering they have experienced or the suffering they see in the world around them. And for people who do believe, suffering is a tremendous challenge.²⁵

However, proponents of these theodicies are right in that some cases of suffering are indeed directly intended –or indirectly allowed, as in the case of Job– by God. Jonah's storm, as discussed above, would be an example of this, as well as a myriad of other examples throughout Scripture. Whether it is to bring about something that would not have been achievable by any other way, such as inner strength, or to correct a person or people group for sin, God's plan is always perfect and always good. Where proponents of Perfect Plan, Soul-Making, Redemptive Suffering and Punishment Theodicies fall short is not in their emphasis on God's sovereignty, but in their assertion that every single detail of life and world events is foreordained by God, success and tragedy alike.

If someone is discerning that God may be causing their suffering for one reason or another, the best response is to embrace the experience. Pray that God would communicate His heart in the situation. God is good and can be trusted that whatever He does is for our good. Let it produce the fruit that God intends. If it is correction for sin, cease sinning. If it is to produce inner strength, pray that God would develop lasting

²⁵ Rice, *Suffering and the Search*, 16.

spiritual fruit. In some way it is meant to bring good change, whether it is to change course, repent of sin, or grow in character or the fruit of the Spirit. Everything God does is good.

Suffering Caused by Satan: Warfare Theodicy

The Bible is clear that an enemy works against the purposes of God. If everything that occurs was ordained by God, then both life and death would have been in His plan. Yet 1 Peter 5:8-9 links the devil to suffering and admonishes believers to “be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, be firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” A. Roy Eckardt suggests that a theodicy is the least useful when it denies or ignores the role of the devil. The theodicy that deals with the idea that suffering and evil come from the devil, who works in direct opposition to God and His purposes, is called Warfare Theodicy.

The concept of the nature and personhood of the devil has developed through biblical history. The devil was not a prominent figure for ancient Jews and gained structure through the apocryphal, apocalyptic and New Testament writings. As Israel and later the church shifted from monism, or the belief that God was the preeminent figure in determining history, to dualism, which held that God and the devil were in tension, the Warfare Theodicy gained increased clarity as well.²⁶ Jesus referred to Satan as “the prince” three times in the book of John (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). He acknowledges that

²⁶ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 250-252.

the devil was the highest power in the fallen world, and did not dispute the claim that Satan was able to offer Him “authority over all the kingdoms of this world” during His temptation in the wilderness. When teaching His disciples to pray, Jesus told them to ask that the will of God would be done, which presupposes that sometimes God’s will may not be done. Furthermore, 1 John 5:19-20 says that the whole world is “under the power of the evil one” but that Jesus came to give understanding that believers may know Him and experience eternal life.

Jeffrey Russell summarizes the primary characteristics of the devil as described in the New Testament as follows:

1. He was the personification of evil;
2. He did physical harm to people by attacking their bodies or possessing them;
3. He tested people, tempting them to sin in order to destroy them or recruit them in his struggle against the Lord;
4. He accused and punished sinners;
5. He was the head of a host of evil spirits, fallen angels, or demons;
6. He had assimilated most of the evil qualities of ancient destructive nature spirits or ghosts;
7. He was the ruler of this world of matter and bodies until such time as the Lord’s own kingdom would come;
8. Until that final time he would be in constant warfare against the good Lord;

9. He would be defeated by the good Lord at the end of the world.²⁷

If these characteristics describe the enemy of God, it follows then that anything that occurs which would be consistent with the devil's nature cannot be considered part of God's will. Russel describes the devil as the personification of evil, which is "meaningless, senseless destruction. Evil destroys and it does not build; it rips and it does not mend; it cuts and it does not bind. It strives always and everywhere to annihilate, to turn to nothing. To take all being and render it nothing is the heart of evil."²⁸ This description is consistent with John 10:10 which says that "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Here Jesus asserted that God's purposes are to bring abundant life, and that He is not the one who steals, kills or destroys.

Thus anything that brings destruction, tearing down and annihilation is a work of the enemy and not God. Sometimes the destructive effects can be due to an unhealthy emotional response and lack of coping skills, but in cases where faith, positive thinking and a desire to grow from the experience are not producing the good fruit of God, it is most likely not a work of God. This is the key for discerning whether suffering that is caused by the devil.

Gregory Boyd observes that the two activities which most characterized Jesus' ministry were exorcism and healing. Many times the two of these were linked together. While some theodicies may explain disease or demonization as serving a divine purpose, Jesus never, in any case, treated either as anything but the work of the enemy. In some

²⁷ Russell, *The Devil*, 256.

²⁸ Russell, *The Devil*, 23.

cases, He treated sickness as a direct demonic oppression, and healed the person by casting out the demonic force causing the disease. In other cases, Jesus did not perform an exorcism but always opposed the sickness by setting the person free. In fact, demonstrating His healing was central to demonstrating the presence of the kingdom of God.²⁹

Thus this theodicy is in direct opposition to the Perfect Plan Theodicy. While God can use setbacks and challenges to still accomplish His good plan, He is not the author of brokenness and suffering. Jesus came to demolish the works of the enemy and demonstrated that God is not behind the bondage and sickness that is so commonly experienced in this world. Yet this theodicy falls far short in the claim that all suffering comes from the enemy. The old adage that “the devil made me do it” is not accepted among parents in response to their children’s misdoings and it is likewise not an acceptable answer for any theodicy. While the devil can be the source of some suffering, each person is responsible for their own behavior and their own sin and this theodicy fails to take this into account.

Response of the Believer when Suffering is caused by Satan

Satan came to steal, kill and destroy. Everything he does brings death and destruction. Jesus came to set humanity free. The believer can discern that the devil is the source of a particular suffering when the situation bears the smell of the destruction which he desires. Sometimes this comes in the form of obstacles to the work of the Spirit, such as evangelism and the healthy functioning of the church as the body of Christ. Other

²⁹ Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 36-37.

times this may come in the form of sickness and disease. Jesus always healed and never regarded sickness to be a work of the Father. When God does something, it bears good fruit and brings life. Even in cases of correction, any suffering brought on by God would bring increased freedom, joy and holiness.

If someone is discerning that a particular suffering is caused by Satan, the proper response then would not be to embrace the experience, as would be the case when it comes from God, but to resist it and ask the Father in heaven to send His angels to work on one's behalf. It can be assumed with confidence that God is "on your side" and that His will is for the believer to overcome every obstacle presented by the devil. In particular, the believer can pray with confidence for healing, knowing that it is always God's will to heal.

God uses everything for good and in the end, whether suffering comes from God or from Satan, God will use it to produce good fruit and accomplish divine purposes in one's life. In that sense, it does not matter whether something comes from God or Satan. Yet where the distinction lies is in whether to embrace the fruit that can come out of suffering, or the suffering itself. When suffering comes from God, one can embrace both the factor that causes the suffering as well as the fruit that it produces. In contrast, one would never want to accept a gift that was meant to steal, kill and destroy; in that case one runs to the Lord for safety and asks Him to fix the broken situation.

Suffering Caused by Sin: Free Will Theodicy

In the garden, God punished Satan for tempting Adam and Eve, but also held Adam and Eve accountable for listening to Satan and disobeying God. Free Will

Theodicy explains free will as the root of suffering and evil. While Perfect Plan Theodicy emphasized God's goodness, proponents of the Free Will Theodicy emphasize God's love. Alvin Plantinga, one of the central contemporary thinkers in support of the Free Will Theodicy, believes that in order for moral goodness to exist, moral evil must also exist. Without the possibility for evil, choice no longer exists and goodness disappears as well, for goodness is not truly good without it being a choice. A perfect God created the world but did not create humans to be robots; hence they could choose to do good or evil and God is not responsible for everything that occurs on the earth. According to Plantinga, "the fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong . . . counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good."³⁰

Unfortunately, that sin causes a brokenness and pain not only for the perpetrator, but for the victims as well. Sometimes it is even difficult to separate the two, as was the case in the Baltimore riots. These situations –when people suffer due to their own or someone else's sin, such as violence or even drunk driving– pose difficulties for the Perfect Plan Theodicy in its ability to grasp the full magnitude of suffering in the world. Could it be that God ordains, and even intends, for mass gang rapes in the DR Congo? What does that say about God?

One only needs to reflect on their own lives for a moment to realize that in some cases, suffering is indeed the result of sin. Free Will Theodicy is based on the idea that God, who is absolute in His goodness, created finite beings that are free to choose between good and evil. These beings, including humans and some fallen angels,

³⁰ Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 30.

sometimes choose to do evil and the result of this wreaks havoc on the natural world. Therefore it is not God who chose to create suffering, but the sinful choices of fallen beings that creates a web of brokenness and pain.³¹

However, this idea that suffering is a result of sin has been taken too far in some Protestant and Charismatic circles. Operating under this paradigm, it is all too common for some well-meaning believer to determine that grandma's cancer is due to her own or someone else's sin. This is because classic Protestantism linked suffering to sin, with a concept of sin linked to morality.³² This sadly heaps more suffering upon an already difficult circumstance, as now grandma is not only struggling with cancer, but also the guilt that she or another member of her family may have been the cause. Liberalism rejected this, but went too far in other direction.

Wendy Farley describes the destructiveness of sin by identifying its four dimensions and the corresponding relationship to suffering: deception, callousness, bondage and guilt. Deception can take the form of either willfully misleading someone else, or of being oneself deceived like Adam and Eve in the garden. It can cause suffering when someone willfully deceives another, or when they themselves are deceived into thinking that a bad action is good, such as torture or brainwash. Even a belief in the lie that God is not good and is holding out on humanity can cause sin, as was illustrated in the garden. Callousness, the second form identified by Farley, occurs when repeated exposure to sin or suffering causes indifference. This callousness causes inaction, and can be seen particularly with regard to systemic issues such as racism and discrimination.

³¹ Hick, *Encountering Evil*, 39.

³² Hall, *God & Human Suffering*, 75.

Bondage describes the way that sin traps humanity's weak flesh, which is unable to escape sin other than by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Finally, guilt describes sin that is consciously and willfully committed. This can sometimes produce devastating suffering, as Hitler, Mao Zedong, and Idi Amin perpetrated evil to such an extent that it cannot be attributed to deception.³³

Response of the Believer when Suffering is caused by Sin

God can use everything together for good and there is nothing too far beyond the boundaries for God to be able to do so, including the most grievous sins. If suffering is caused by one's own wrongdoing, it is important to repent and make the situation right as quickly as possible. Running to the Lord in these situations, rather than away from Him in shame, allows Him to give guidance and wisdom as to how the situation can be made right.

If one is the victim of another's sin, making the situation right is a matter of forgiveness. Christ Himself hung on the cross and prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Just as Christ prayed this in the midst of the ultimate rejection and injustice, Christians are called to follow suit in offering forgiveness to those who have wronged them. Jesus commanded this in the Sermon on the Mount: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44-45). Forgiveness may not always benefit the one being forgiven, but for the one who has been wronged, nothing can set them free from anger, bitterness and pain like forgiveness.

³³ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*, 1st Ed, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 44-51.

Suffering Caused by Nature: Genesis 3 Theodicy

It is clear in the book of Genesis that God designed the world to be perfect. Eden was a beautiful paradise, the shadow of which still exists as a seed of longing in each person's heart. It was sin that brought suffering, brokenness and imminent death into the world. Humankind and even the earth itself experiences brokenness due to sin:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17b-19)

In this passage it is clear that sin affected the created world, as the ground itself became cursed. This curse took the form of physical pain, obstacles (symbolized by thorns and thistles), toil and hardship (symbolized by the sweat of one's face), and ultimately death when one returns to the dust.

Sometimes suffering can be caused by natural disasters: earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, droughts and the like. It is possible that God may be the source behind some seemingly natural occurrences.³⁴ However, certainly not every storm is caused by God Himself. In Genesis 3, along with Adam and Eve the earth also entered into a state of brokenness caused by sin in a general sense, but not necessarily as a direct cause and effect in each case. It is not God's will that 20,000 people died in the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan.³⁵ Nor was it a result of any individual's sinfulness or an attack of Satan. Sometimes, a broken earth rages and innocent lives are lost as a result.

³⁴ There are cases in Scripture where God causes a natural disaster, such as the plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7-11) or the droughts experienced by Israel (1 Kings 17).

³⁵ Shinji Nakahara and Masao Ichikawa, "Mortality in the 2011 Tsunami in Japan," *Journal of Epidemiology* 23, no. 1 (January 5, 2013), 70-73.

Thomas Aquinas was one of the first theologians to articulate the concept of what contemporary theologians call “natural evil” or “physical evil.” According to Aquinas, there were two types of evil. The first, *malum culpae*, means “evil done” or “fault,” which refers to a moral evil that is committed by a person in the form of sin. The second type of evil, called *malum poenae*, means “evil suffered” and can also be translated as “pain.” This refers to suffering or evil for which someone is a victim, and to Aquinas this specifically referred to the decay that occurs in the world in the form of sickness and death. To Aquinas, this type of evil occurs due to an absence of goodness, but is indirectly allowed by God in order to achieve an ultimate good, such as a surgeon amputating a limb in order to save someone’s body. As such, pain is not caused by God directly, nor Satan, nor anyone’s moral sin, but is a result of the earth’s decay and natural evil.³⁶

The apostle Paul may have been alluding to this sort of phenomenon when he wrote that “for the creation was subject to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21). Indeed the sinfulness of humanity causes creation to suffer.

The Bible distinguishes between a sinful act, and a general concept of sin. Thus, while every experience of suffering cannot be linked directly to a particular sinful act, the presence of sin in the world is the causal factor for suffering and pain in general.

³⁶ Ryan, *God and the Mystery*, 127-128.

Response of the Believer when Suffering is caused by Nature

A work of nature is difficult to discern because sometimes it can be attributed to the other three sources discussed above. Unless clearly specified otherwise, in the wake of a tsunami or earthquake it is not helpful to embrace the situation as God's will, for clearly it does not bear the mark of His good nature. Nor would one reject it as the work of the enemy or sin. Much pain has been caused by blaming victims in the wake of a disaster and this does not help to restore the situation.

Sometimes, disasters are a heartbreaking result of a fallen creation. In these situations, one can join in the cry of all creation by empathizing and helping the victims while looking forward to the day when there is no more pain or sorrow. Yet even in the current situation, God can make everything right and once again running to Him is the only way to bring restoration out of devastation.

Hope during Suffering

It is a common saying that "what does not kill you makes you stronger." Sometimes this is true and it is often the rationale given for why God would ordain seemingly bad situations. One can certainly grow by overcoming a trauma or challenge; it is in these times that one can learn to access a deep well inside, a reservoir previously unknown to the sufferer and supplied by the Lord, that flows forth not only to provide strength for the afflicted themselves but miraculously to all those around them as well. This strength produces perseverance and the ability to bear greater weight in future suffering, as if a muscle was exercised through the circumstance. The apostle Paul describes this in Romans 5:3-5: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering

produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

However, sometimes suffering does not seem to produce strength but instead leads to greater oppression, depression and weakness. It is very possible to be worse for the wear, even when sincerely trying to give the circumstance to the Lord. In the confusion and anger that follow in the wake of a devastating event, it is so common to become angry at God or deny His existence. Yet at no point is that a helpful response. So, what is the difference between suffering that produces growth and the fruit of the Spirit, as described by Paul, and suffering that brings greater brokenness and death?

This leads to the foundational crux of this paper: while God did not design all things, God can use all things. Regardless of the source of a particular suffering, every example of God's faithfulness to bring fruit out of devastation, there is a believer who is praying to and trusting in God. Yet the way God uses circumstances does not necessarily mean that He designed the difficulty. When all things are given to Him in trust and prayer, He can not only bring restoration but such a depth of fullness that it is as if He would have intended them in the first place. As Romans 8:28 asserts, "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose."

Returning to the example of the two storms provides helpful illustration for this. It was in the storm that Jesus' disciples first realized that He was God. Had a life threatening storm not occurred, they would never have wondered, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matthew 8:27).

Likewise, in the case of Jonah, he had disobeyed God and the storm he experienced was due to his own sinfulness. Yet when he repented, God was able to use the situation not only to restore Jonah but to reach the sailors who would never have known the Lord otherwise. Jonah 1:5 says that at the beginning of the storm, the sailors were afraid and each one “cried out to his god.” Yet after experiencing the power of God to cease the storm from its raging, verse 16 says that they “feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” If Jonah had obeyed God and went straight to Ninevah, these men would never have come to experience the power and reality of God. Yet if Jonah had not repented, he would have died and the other sailors would have perished with him. It is only when he relented and turned back to the Lord that God was able to use the situation to bring blessing to all involved.

In each case, regardless of the source, running toward God, and not away from God, is the only way to bring about restoration and reconciliation. This hope is something to look forward to in this life, while even yet looking forward to the day when “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion

God, in His sovereign goodness, can bring good out of every situation. Yet throughout church history, theologians have been discussing various theodicies for explaining the goodness of God in the midst of suffering and evil. Some emphasize God’s sovereignty and believe that suffering comes from God, as exemplified in the Perfect Plan Theodicy, the Punishment Theodicy and the concept of Redemptive

Suffering. Others believe that good and evil are in a battle and that only that which is (and appears to be) good comes from God while everything negative and bad comes from the devil; this is called Warfare Theodicy. Still others see human weakness and sin as the source of suffering and adhere to Free Will Theodicy.

Each one of these theodicies makes an important contribution to an understanding of suffering. However, when taken as the only explanation, each falls short in providing a comprehensive answer in which anyone, experiencing any circumstance, can find peace and strength. Only in considering each one of these frameworks as parts of a whole and embracing a theology of diversity can a Christian truly walk through suffering with grace and run toward God, in all of His goodness, to find clarity and restoration.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

Suffering is a phenomenon that touches the lives of everyone who walks the face of this earth. Thus, while this dissertation focuses on missionaries serving in cross-cultural contexts as the primary target group, it is hoped that the results will be helpful for anyone who has wondered where God is during difficult times and how to best respond to trials and suffering. The project was composed of three main activities: in-depth interviews with missionaries, a survey in response to a concept paper on the theology of suffering, and structured journaling by the researcher. It was implemented over the period of one year, from December 2015 to December 2016. The following is a description of these activities and an analysis of the results.

Project Description

This phenomenological research study was designed to explore the dynamics of suffering; particularly the way one's theological and conceptual framework for understanding suffering affects both the experience of it and the corresponding response. Creswell described phenomenological research as "a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the research describes the lived experiences of

individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants.”¹ This project was designed to glean insight from seasoned missionaries about how one can understand and respond in a healthy way to various forms of suffering, as well as to test a theological framework for responding to suffering according to its source. While the intended target audience for this project was other missionaries who may be either new or struggling, suffering is a phenomenon that touches the life of every person regardless of calling or location. Thus, this study was also designed to be applicable in any context where a believer may find themselves to be challenged by the goodness of God and unsure about how to move forward in a difficult situation.

For this project, the research methods and project activities were closely intertwined and in some cases one and the same. It was composed of three main activities, including: (a) conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with missionaries, (b) developing a concept paper on the theology of suffering and collecting feedback from non-missionaries through a quantitative and qualitative online survey, and (c) structured journaling by the researcher. The following sections describe these three components and analyze their results.

In-Depth Interviews

The first activity and data collection method was to conduct unstructured interviews with missionaries who are either currently serving or had previously worked in various contexts around the world, and are doing well and thriving in their ministries. It was assumed that missionaries who have retained their heart of softness before the Lord

¹ John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th Ed, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 14.

and served consistently for at least five years without becoming discouraged or jaded have developed insight that would be useful for others. The purpose of these interviews was to: (a) learn how they understand suffering; (b) find out what they do, practically, to respond to difficulties; and (c) gather testimonies of how God works in times of suffering. The following interview questions were designed for this project:

1. Context: Can you please share a little bit about your ministry and God's particular calling in your life?
2. Testimonies: Do you have any stories or testimonies of God's faithfulness in suffering that you would like to share?
3. Response to Suffering (Practical): What do you do, practically, when you are going through painful or difficult times? What does that process look like for you as you go before the Lord?
4. Response to Suffering (Negative): Has there ever been a time when you fell into despair or hopelessness? What was the breakthrough for you? Was there a difference between those times, and other times of strength and perseverance?
5. Finding Hope and Joy: What do you hope for when you go through times of struggle, and how do you find joy?
6. Response to Suffering (Theological): How would you describe your thoughts on the theology of suffering in general? For example, why do we suffer? Is there value in it? Does the source of suffering matter?

In practice, however, most of the time these specific interview questions were not used as the researcher attempted to tap into the passion of the individual missionary and let the Holy Spirit guide the conversation. It was the desire of the researcher not to

impose any previous understanding or strong agenda to the conversation, and instead let the missionary talk about what was closest to his or her heart as it related to the general issue of suffering. More or less, the main topics included in the above list of questions were covered in each interview. The only question that may not have been sufficiently covered in most of the interviews was question 4. In some cases, this was because the nature of the conversation was already very personal and the researcher did not feel comfortable asking the respondents more about their times of despair or hopelessness. In other cases, the conversation simply moved in a different direction.

Interviews took place over a period of one year, starting in December 2015 and ending in December 2016. The researcher interviewed missionaries during trips to China and Myanmar (December 2015) and the Philippines (March 2016), as well as in Lancaster, PA (October 2016), Redding, CA (November 2016) and Harrisburg, PA (various dates). The names of the missionaries,² dates they were interviewed, and countries in which they currently or previously served are listed in the following table.

² Some missionaries preferred to remain anonymous, and in these cases the names have been changed.

Table 1. List of Missionaries Interviewed

	Name	Date of Interview	Countries of Service
1	Mike and Deena	December 2, 2015	China
2	Dora	December 6, 2015	Myanmar
3	John ³	March 15, 2016	Philippines
4	Steve and Sally	October 20, 2016	Kenya, England
5	Brittany	October 20, 2016	Yemen
6	Mike and Andrea	October 21, 2016	Haiti
7	Rachel	October 22, 2016	Jamaica
8	Stephanie	November 14, 2016	Spain, Croatia, Malawi
9	Seth	November 15, 2016	Hong Kong, Zambia
10	Emily	November 15, 2016	Hong Kong, Zambia
11	Ashley	November 15, 2016	Saudi Arabia
12	Maria	December 3, 2016	China

Depending on how each interview proceeded and whether it took on an experiential or a theological flavor, it was expected that the way respondents understand suffering with regard to its source and response would either be explicitly asked as an interview question, or implicitly extrapolated from the way that they interpreted and explained their experiences. However, in practice most of the interviews did not cover the source of suffering and instead focused on other emerging themes, not previously anticipated by the researcher, as led by the Holy Spirit.

Concept Paper

While the researcher did not bring much preconceived agenda into the in-depth interviews, the concept paper was used, in contrast, as a way to collect feedback on specific ideas about the theology of suffering. A *Concept Paper on the Theology of*

³ John was a Christian aid worker, not a missionary, but his story and the joy he exhibited was so unique that the researcher was compelled to interview him.

Suffering (see Appendix A) describing the two legs of a balanced theology of suffering was developed and distributed to friends and family of the researcher through Facebook and email. An online survey, administered through SurveyMonkey, allowed the researcher to collect feedback on the ideas presented in the essay. These respondents were all non-missionaries.

The survey instrument consisted of ten questions and included three content areas: (a) demographic information; (b) theological aspects of the essay; and (c) practical aspects of applying the framework. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix B. The first set of questions about the respondent's demographic and religious information were designed to determine whether there were any differences between denominational affiliations in their response to the essay. Particularly, as the essay affirmed the reality of spiritual warfare, it was investigated whether this theology was more acceptable to those who hold a charismatic worldview⁴ than to those who do not.

The second half of the survey included qualitative short-answer questions about their thoughts on the framework. The first page was designed to see whether the respondent agreed or disagreed with the theological concepts presented in the essay. Then the final set of questions explored whether they felt that it was useful to think about the theology of suffering in general, as well as specifically whether they thought the framework would be helpful for them in their everyday lives. Beyond the primary purpose of researching for this project, using a survey to explore whether the concepts rang true and were useful for people who come from disparate theological backgrounds

⁴ Charismatic was defined as holding the belief that the modern day church is meant to function in the gifts of the Spirit as identified in 1 Corinthians 12.

was intended to allow the researcher to pilot test the way the ideas would be received among a more general population.

Structured Journaling

Throughout the process of writing, implementing and analyzing this project, the researcher noted some reflections as the implementation proceeded, including various thoughts on what worked well and not so well. As the only one who was intimately involved in researching for the literature review, writing the concept paper, analyzing the feedback, and conducting the in-depth interviews, the researcher was the main unifying factor between the various sources of information in this project. This was particularly helpful due to the fact that, in practice, the two other data sources worked in parallel rather than conjunction. Because the journaling occurred in response to the other activities conducted during this project, the results are spread throughout this chapter including the Lessons Learned section below, rather than given its own section.

Limitations and Lessons Learned

Some limitations were inherent in the project design while others were encountered during implementation. The most significant challenge for this project was data triangulation. Typically triangulation is achieved by either gathering information on one population from multiple instruments or data sources, or by administering the same data collection instrument to two separate populations which are alike in their experience of the particular phenomenon. Instead, this project applied two different data collection methods to two different groups of respondents. Because suffering is a phenomenon that

is not unique to missionaries, it was originally envisioned that the content covered by these two activities would overlap enough that a loose triangulation would be achieved. The survey data (which collected feedback on the specific and explicit ideas presented in the essay regarding the sources and responses to suffering) would be triangulated by the interviews with missionaries (where their understanding of the source and response to suffering would be inferred implicitly from the way they explained their stories).

However, in practice, the focus of these two activities diverged and did not overlap as much as was expected by the researcher. The content from the in-depth interviews did not cover the source of suffering and the way it impacted the missionaries' response; instead, other themes emerged as highlighted by the Holy Spirit. The survey questions, on the other hand, focused solely on non-missionaries' responses to the concept paper. As a result, these two components were analyzed separately in this document.

The second challenge faced by this project was that it fell behind schedule. Particularly, writing the concept paper took many more months than originally planned and took time and focus away from other components of the project. An initial version of the document was written roughly on schedule, by the beginning of October 2016, but the researcher did not sense that it struck the intended chord and decided to start over again from scratch. As a result, the concept paper was not finished until the beginning of December 2016, which allowed very little time for collecting and analyzing the survey feedback. In the meantime, during the summer and autumn of 2016, there were some potential opportunities for additional interviews with missionaries that the researcher was unable to follow up on due to a lack of time. Still, despite the challenges it created, the

decision to spend the extra time on the concept paper was a good one; in writing the second draft, important extra layers were added to the piece, including the entirety of Leg One and a clarification of first degree and second degree causation.

Analysis: In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews were qualitative and unstructured in nature, in order to explore what was on the heart of the respondent. In general, the researcher coded the following six themes that emerged from the conversations: (a) obedience regardless of whether this was linked to understanding, (b) confidence in God gained through a history of provision, (c) the important role of the charismatic gifts, (d) practices and disciplines, (e) a revelation of the reality of eternity, and (f) the reward of suffering. Below is an analysis of how the interviews covered each of these themes.

Obedience

Obedience was a theme that arose unexpectedly in the interviews, and in fact many of the missionaries identified a strong link between obedience and responding to suffering. If one is being obedient to God, then whatever trials life may bring can be faced with confidence that God is in it, He will use it, and that everything will be okay. In three of the interviews, the missionaries commented that they had long ago made the decision to obey God's voice, quickly and in everything. Others spoke of obedience in a more general sense. This obedience remains important whether or not one understands how God will make the situation right, as faith is expressed not only through internal

agreement but outward steps of obedience. As Sally stated, “If we are obedient, oh my goodness, whatever takes place, God is so in it. His will will come about.”

Obedience flows easily when one has clarity about God’s nature. Trusting in Him from the deep conviction that God is good and loving is a completely different experience than it is in times when one’s heart questions whether He is really on their side. If one is left with a question about whether God really has their best interest in mind, trust becomes compromised and the obedience may be less likely to follow. Misunderstanding who it is that is asking for obedience leaves one with concerning questions, such as: How could God let that happen? What is He doing? Is He punishing me? Why am I even doing this? Did I hear Him and His call right anyway? This emotional and spiritual stress compounds the suffering and may cause someone to respond in an emotionally reactive way.

Some missionaries found that one of the biggest factors that allowed them to grow in trust, obedience and relationship with God was making a conscious decision not to question the goodness of God, regardless of the circumstances in which they found themselves. As Deena described:

First of all, whenever we were faced with suffering, [we learned] to declare the goodness of God. We just had to decide that that wasn’t going to be something that was questioned because we weren’t seeing what we wanted to see. We couldn’t just think about it, we had to declare it. We had to set our mind to that. . . . It’s just like –I know this is a silly correlation– but [if I need money] I don’t have to think about, ‘oh I wonder if I’m going to go rob a bank.’ It’s just- I mean it’s a done deal in my mind; that’s just a line I’m not going to cross. Some people might do that. It is an option. It is a choice if you want to try to do that. But for us in our life, [robbing a bank, just like questioning God] is not a choice.

Obedience also flows out of a posture of spending time in God’s presence.

Through the times spent with their Father in prayer, worship, meditation and fellowship,

missionaries were able to clarify the daily call God placed on their lives. This allowed them to discern which people or tasks were and were not their assignment. Clarifying the daily call directly addresses some of the common issues experienced among missionaries regarding burnout and becoming overburdened with the work of the ministry.

Another link that missionaries identified between obedience and suffering is that God puts a special grace and protection on those who walk in His will. On the contrary, walking in disobedience can cause a figurative crack to form in one's spiritual armor and allow the enemy to work in areas that he would not have access to otherwise. Thus the suffering not only arises from the psychological and spiritual angst of disobedience, but also from the real effects or "open doors" that it can allow into in one's life.

History of Provision

Experiencing God's faithfulness builds faith and trust. Once one begins walking in obedience and seeing God prove His goodness, this history with God brings an assurance that He will come through again as difficult situations arise. Mike and Andrea described this dynamic:

[Seeing how God supernaturally provided the funds and opportunities that arose for us to go to the field allowed us to know that] God provided. So when we hit the ground in Haiti we knew God had sent us. Had we done it the traditional route of raising funds, having everything secure before [going into the field], we might not have had the faith that was imparted through the supernatural provision. We might not have had the faith to stay when the difficulties hit. But we knew God had sent us.

When facing difficulty, it can be tempting to wonder whether one will be able to get through it or if God will provide. Supporters and mission directors may also put pressure during these times. Sometimes maintaining an assurance of God's provision and

responding out of faith may be a matter of life and death and allows one to address situations from a clear head, rather than make decisions out of a place of fear, anger or any other negative emotion. Mike and Andrea experienced this during their time in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Obeying God saved their life when they were running out of food and medical supplies. At one point, during a motorcycle ride down a dusty road, Mike heard God say, “Turn right now!” When he did, he discovered a secret warehouse full of supplies. They soon partnered with the organization that was running the warehouse and this is what saved their lives as well as the lives of many others during the disaster.

Role of the Charismatic Gifts

Many of the missionaries also found that regular encounters with God’s presence and an understanding of the power and authority of the Holy Spirit brought them not only personal peace, but also a breakthrough and fruitfulness to their ministry. The power of God accomplishes what their individual ability or strength could never do. While there is a role for counseling in some cases, God’s presence is able to fill them with strength and hopefulness and wash away shame, bitterness, sadness, depression and many of the negative emotions that missionaries face when coming to a place of burnout. Thus, while spending time with God goes hand in hand with obedience, it is separate from it as only the active indwelling of the Holy Spirit can effectively wash over a soul in times of distress.

Furthermore, interviewees discussed the way that working with the Holy Spirit and growing in an understanding of spiritual warfare increased their effectiveness in

ministry. Encounters with the spiritual realm in both a positive and negative sense may be more frequent overseas due to the nature of the spiritual climate and the active work missionaries undertake for the kingdom of God. When asked how missionary life was different with the charismatic gifts, Steve described his experience before understanding the dynamics of spiritual warfare:

[The charismatic gifts help because they allow you to] know you have the authority to deal with whatever you face. . . My crisis came [when not long after our second term as missionaries] a nurse called me over to the dispensary because we were in charge of the station. When I walked in, she said this little girl is dying but there's nothing medically wrong with her. And I saw my first demon; I could see it in her face. I can't describe it other than that I knew I was seeing a demon. I knew I should be able to deal with it, but I knew I had no power to deal with it. I walked out, and this little girl died, and it broke me. I just- never again will I stand in the face of the enemy and not have the power.

Missionaries also cited using these principles on a regular basis and incorporating them into their times of prayer and intercession, as discussed below under Practices and Disciplines.

Practices and Disciplines

Each missionary had a different way that they interacted with God during times of difficulty. Some would quote the scriptures, others would picture themselves with God in some way such as sitting on His lap or taking a walk with Him, and still others would increase their use of worship and tongues during trials. Regardless of the method, what the missionaries had in common was that they were able to interact with God in a way that was tangible and real for them. Their practices were not an empty discipline, but facilitated an encounter with their loving Father in Heaven. Many times, it was out of that place of rest and peace that God would give them wisdom for what to do in a confusing

situation. While these practices may sometimes be a discipline in times of comfort, when walking through a suffering those same practices proved to be a lifeline.

Living in the Reality of Eternity

Another theme that was presented during many the interviews was the acute awareness that, as Christians, one is storing their treasures in heaven and not living for the pleasures of the present moment. A revelation of eternity casts a new light on every decision and experience, and allows one to truly endure suffering for the joy that is set before them. While many may be looking for the earthly joys, and this is something God does provide in the moment, knowing that the eternal inheritance is so much bigger than anything this life allows one to willingly give up this life in anticipation of the next. Brittany, who serves in a context where martyrdom is a serious risk, discussed the importance of this perspective and recalled a Jim Elliott quote that set the direction of her life: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

This awareness of eternity also changes one’s attitude toward death. As Brittany described it, “death is just a change of address.” This allows one to stand up in the face of fear or risk and know that whatever the outcome may be –whether they even may be slain– the result for them is good. If they live, they live to see God victorious, and if they die, they move on to their eternal and glorious home.

The Reward of Suffering

Many of the missionaries also had an acute awareness of the reward of suffering. One does not suffer just for the sake of suffering, unless they cause it upon themselves,

and even then coming to a place of repentance can be a reward of self-inflicted suffering. If suffering were not fruitful in some way, none of these missionaries would be signing up for the calling they have answered in their lives. Suffering in many cases, especially for martyrs, was defined as the salvation of their persecutors. This, along with the knowledge of the reality of eternity, provided motivation and even a joy in suffering that would never be possible otherwise. Vision makes all the difference.

A Note on the Source of Suffering

While the interviews did not explicitly discuss the various sources for suffering, one thing remained clear: none of the missionaries attributed suffering to God's will, whether as a punishment for sin or in order to grow them personally. Most of them implicitly seemed to consider the source to be Satan, sinfulness/disobedience, or nothing in particular (as in the case of the Haiti earthquake). This allowed them to fully understand and appreciate the way God was on their side during affliction, actively working to make the situation right, and helping them reach the person or community that they are ministering to in spite of the various trials that come their way in doing so.

Analysis: Concept Paper

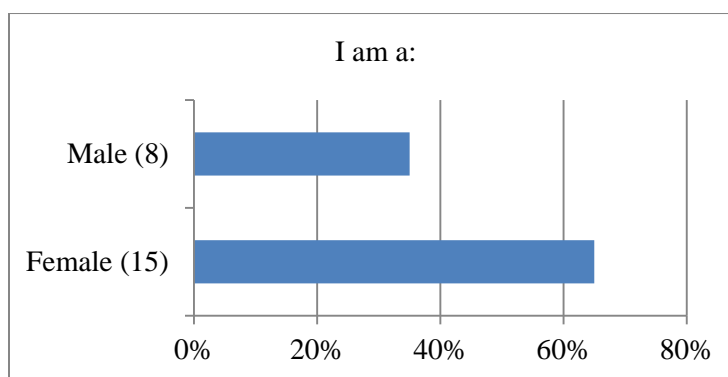
Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

During the past two years, many friends and family of the researcher expressed interest in the topic the researcher was exploring and a desire to read the dissertation. Rather than distributing the lengthy dissertation document, which may not be useful for general consumption, the decision was made to include them in the projects as

respondents. A concept paper on the theology of suffering was written, based loosely on the Theological Foundations paper and oriented toward casual, rather than academic, reading. Care was taken in the writing of the document so as not to include language that may be considered unnecessarily divisive or denominational, and instead to focus on the simple communication of the concept itself. Family and close friends were directly given the opportunity to read the concept paper, and an invitation to participate was also posted on Facebook. In all, the essay and a link to the survey (hosted online through SurveyMonkey) were distributed by email to forty eight people. A total of twenty eight people completed the survey, which is a 58.3% response rate; fifteen others began the survey but did not complete it and these entries were deleted.

The first section of the survey focused on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Among those who responded, roughly three fourths were females and one fourth were males, as seen in the graph below:

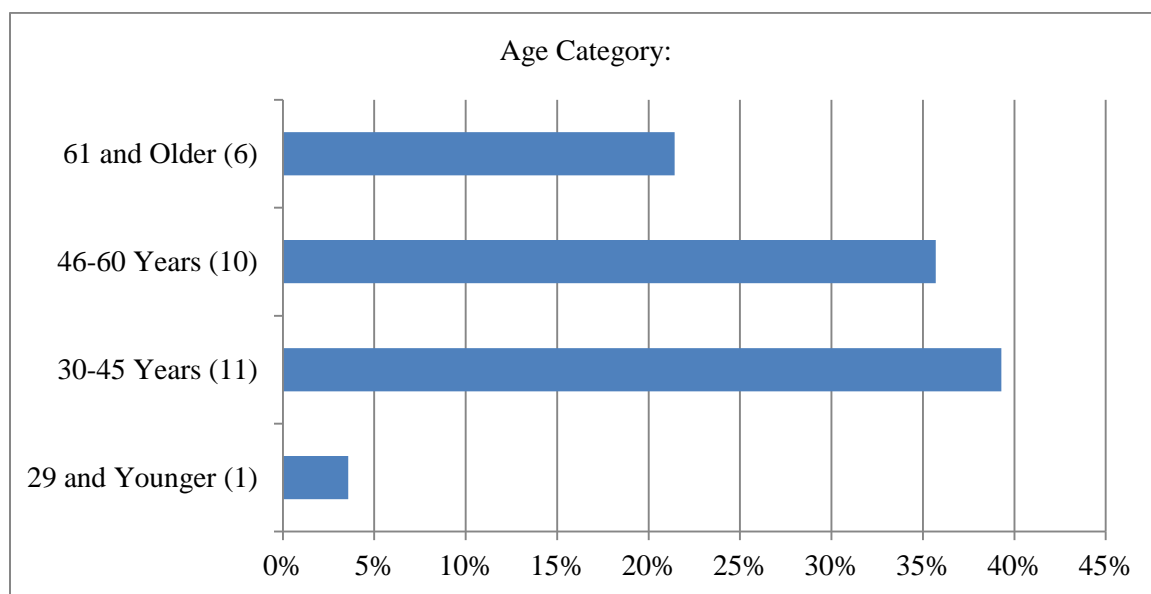
Figure 1. Sex ratio among respondents



With regard to age, the majority (roughly 75%) of respondents were between the ages of thirty and sixty, with eleven respondents falling between thirty and forty five

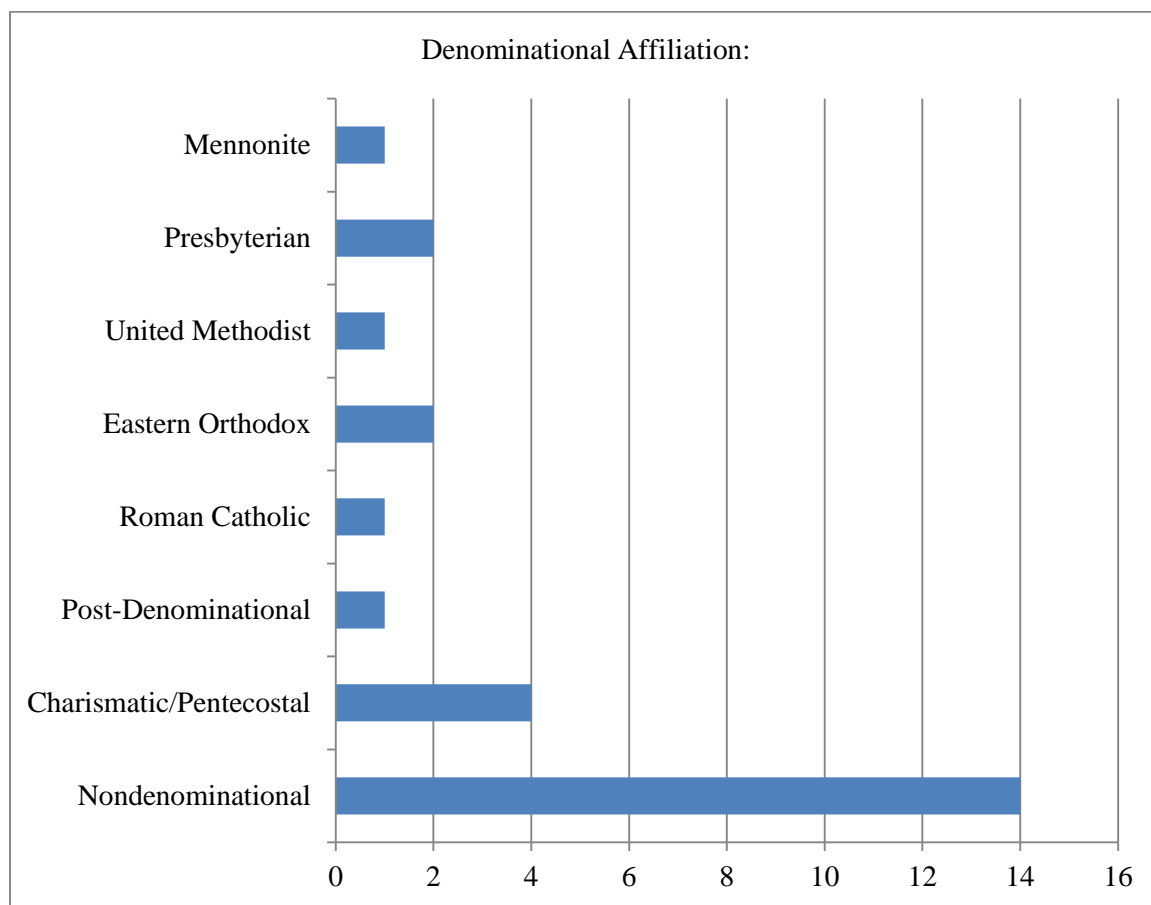
years old and ten respondents in the forty six to sixty year old range. Six were above the age of sixty, and only one was under thirty years old. It is unknown how this age breakdown compares to the median age among all who received the invitation to participate on Facebook, though the researcher suspects that friends on the higher end of the age spectrum were more likely to participate in the study. The graph below illustrates these figures.

Figure 2. Age distribution among respondents



With regard to religion, only one respondent reported that they were not a Christian (they were atheist); the other twenty seven considered themselves to be Christians. Among them, the overwhelming majority were non-denominational with only a few who identified themselves as Charismatic/Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Eastern Orthodox or other denominations, as seen in the chart below:

Figure 3. Denominational affiliation among respondents

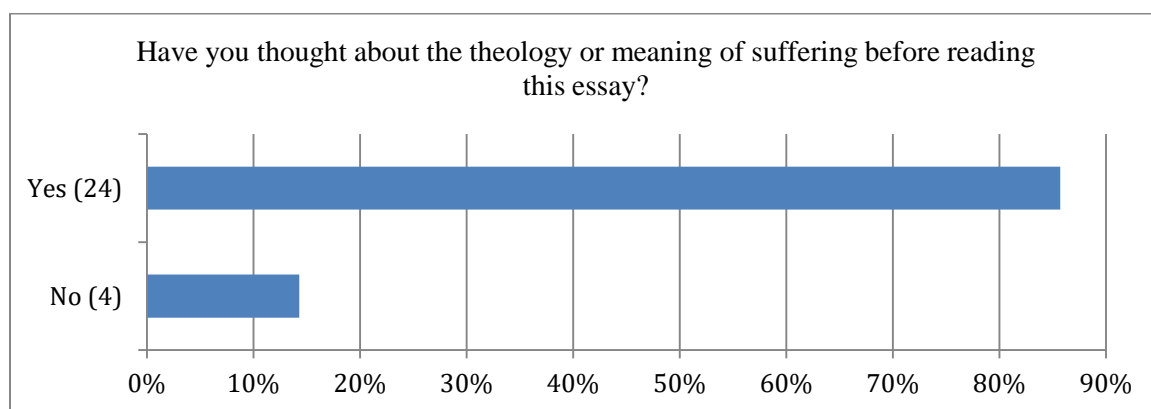


Among those who were Christians, regardless of denomination, roughly three fourths considered themselves to be charismatic (74%, or twenty out of twenty seven) though not everyone attended a charismatic church. Charismatic was defined in the survey as holding a belief that the modern day church should be functioning in the gifts of the Spirit (as identified in 1 Corinthians 12). The survey measured belief rather than church attendance since it is belief which will impact someone's theology, and not necessarily the doctrines of the church they attend. None of the respondents indicated a lack of familiarity with this belief, though one thought the term might be loaded (though they did not indicate how).

Theological Aspects of the Concept Paper

Most, but not all, of the respondents indicated that they had thought about either the theology or the meaning of suffering before reading the essay (85.7%). This meant that twenty four respondents were asked to answer whether or not the concept paper was consistent with their views, and four provided more general feedback on their initial impressions apart from how it compared to their current views. This is summarized in the chart below:

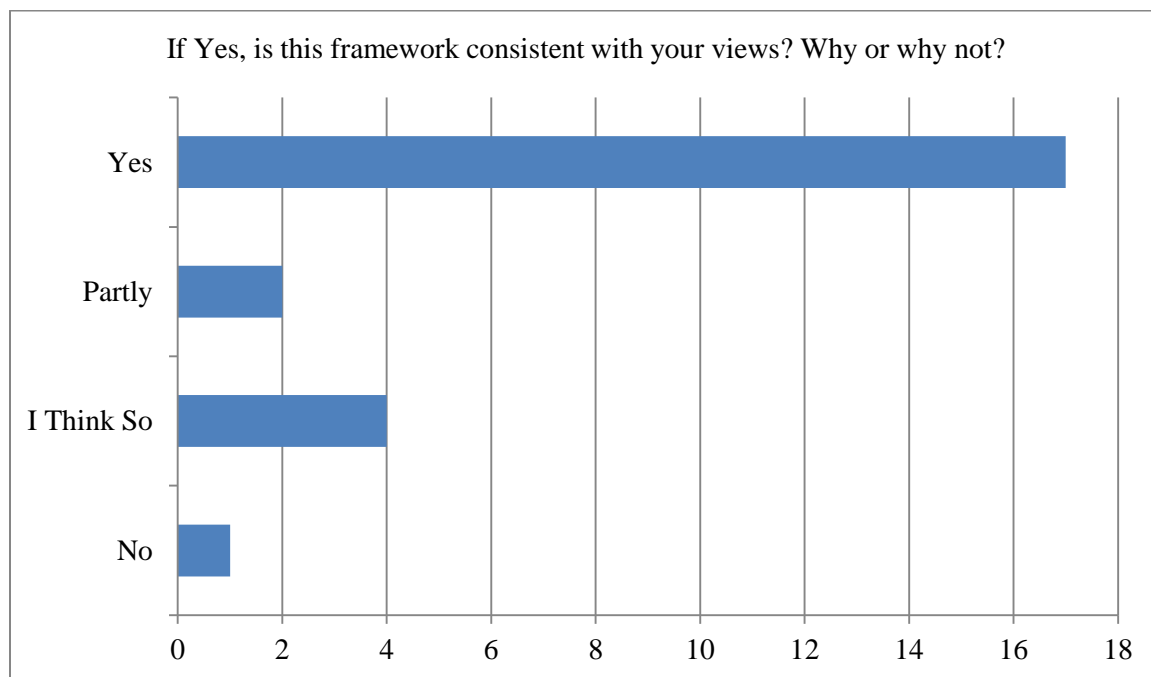
Figure 4. Respondents with previous contemplation of suffering



This question was followed by a qualitative short-answer question about whether the ideas in the framework were consistent with the views of the respondent, which the researcher then coded into categories. Those who agreed without reservation were coded as “Yes,” while those who agreed with some aspects but not others were coded as “Partly.” Some expressed a general positive regard but were not completely sure and these were coded as “I Think So,” while others did not agree and these were coded as “No.” Among those who had expressed previous reflection on suffering, 78.9% indicated that the framework was clearly consistent with their views (fourteen out of nineteen

answered yes). One respondent indicated no, with the rest responding either partly or I think so.

Figure 5. Agreement with the framework



The three respondents who answered either “No” or “Partly” did so because they disagreed with the idea that God would be a source of suffering. A common theme among those who agreed was that the essay helped them to clarify, solidify and/or better articulate their position on the issue; 8 respondents expressed something to this effect. The atheist saw the sources being random rather than spiritual, and suffering dependent on the way someone perceives the facts with which they are presented in life.

Because the concept paper discussed spiritual warfare, it was expected that there may be a difference between charismatics and non-charismatics in the number who agreed with the framework, as charismatics were expected more likely to believe in

spiritual warfare. It was also expected that there may be a difference between denominations in their understanding of the theology of suffering and agreement with the essay. However, there was no notable difference in the responses or level of agreement between the denominations included in the study; in fact, if anything, charismatics were slightly more likely to disagree⁵ with the inclusion of God as a source of suffering. Furthermore, there were no notable differences between age and gender in the responses.

Among those who had not previously contemplated suffering, two expressed clear agreement, though it could have been made clearer that the difference between the two legs was a matter of responsibility. Two respondents seemed to express partial agreement and that the framework was helpful but they were not yet sure about their beliefs. One provided feedback on the essay without expressing any personal views. The two who disagreed did so because one thought suffering comes from Satan only, and the other thought it was a combination of God and Free Will.

When asked if this framework changed their views in any way, the majority indicated that it did not (71.4%, or twenty respondents), while 28.6% (eight respondents) said that it did. However, many of those who said that it did not change their view expressed that the essay brought clarity and coherence to their thoughts and reaffirmed what they believed. Among those who said it did change their beliefs, some said that the essay helped them to separate the distinctions in the different types of suffering. One said that Leg One was an important reminder that God's responsibility in suffering is that of a

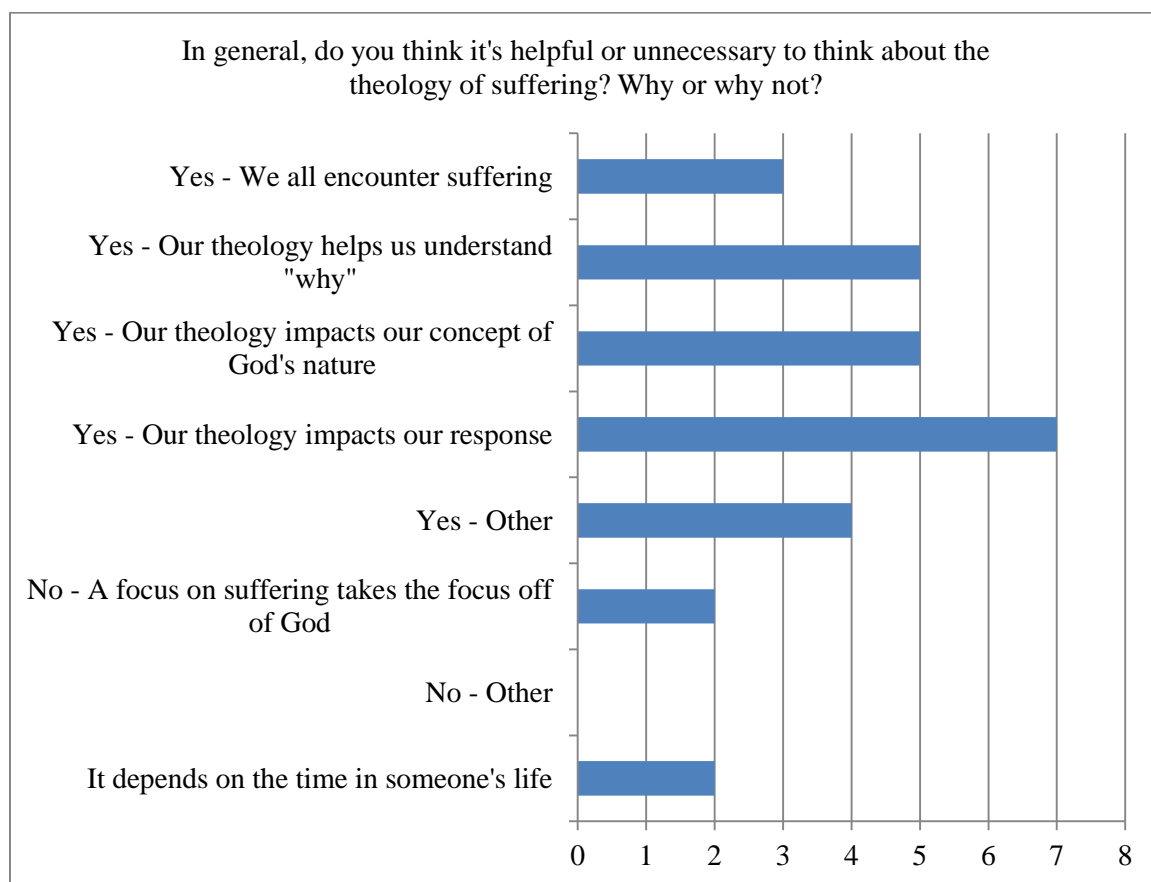
⁵ The three respondents who expressed disagreement were charismatic, while no non-charismatics expressed disagreement. However the sample size was too small to determine statistical significance, so none of the findings in this study can be extended to describe the general population. Furthermore, these respondents do not represent a clear population as "friends of the researcher" is the only characteristic they all had in common.

good Father rather than sending punishment for sins, and another reported that it helped them refocus on the response to suffering rather than the source.

Practical Applications of the Concept Paper

The last two questions in the survey were geared toward whether the respondents believed that it was helpful, in general, to think about suffering, and then specifically whether they thought this framework would be useful for them in the future when they encounter times of suffering. The responses were coded into eight categories, as illustrated in the following graph:

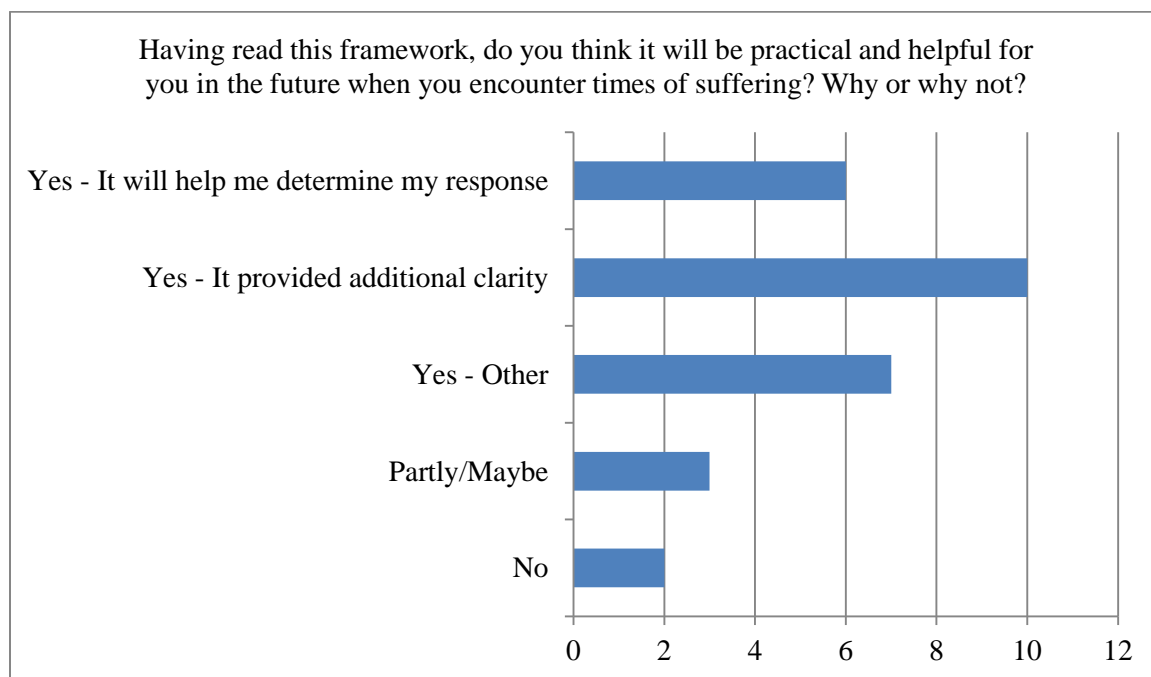
Figure 6. Attitudes regarding whether it is useful to think about suffering



The majority of respondents (92.8%, or twenty six out of twenty eight) believed that in general it is helpful to think about suffering at least at some time or another in one's life. Of these, roughly two thirds felt it was important for one of the following four reasons: (a) we all encounter suffering and it helps us to have empathy for others; (b) thinking about suffering helps us reconcile the question of why bad things happen; (c) our beliefs about suffering impacts our relationship with God and concept of His nature, particularly when it comes to His role in suffering; and (d) the way we think about suffering impacts our response. The reasons why it was important for the other third either varied or they did not indicate why they thought it was helpful. Those who did not think it was helpful to think about suffering in general believed that it takes the focus off of God. One respondent challenged the researcher to develop a corresponding framework for the theology of joy.

The final question in the survey asked the respondents whether they thought the framework described in the essay would be useful for them in the future when they encounter times of suffering. The answers were coded by the researcher and fell into the categories listed in the figure below:

Figure 7. Attitudes regarding whether the framework will be helpful



The majority of respondents (82.1%, or twenty three out of twenty eight) reported that the framework would be useful for them in the future. Of these, almost half (ten or 43.5%) said that it was helpful because it provided additional clarity for them in considering the various sources and responses to suffering. One fourth (six or 26.1%) reported that it will help them determine their response to suffering in the future. Most of those who were categorized as “Other” did not indicate why it would be helpful but that they appreciated the essay. Other factors included: (a) it will help them explain suffering to others, (b) it was a good reminder and helped solidify or clarify their views, (c) it was encouraging for them to read, and (d) it prompted them to look into the idea of the source of suffering more deeply. Three respondents indicated that they partly or maybe agreed with the framework, and reasons included that they do not look for why suffering occurs, that the diagnosis may or may not be correct, and that there should be ways of moving on

from someone's actions other than forgiveness. Finally, two respondents said that it would not be helpful for them, because there is either no good answer to suffering or that their focus is on God instead of suffering.

Other Considerations from Researcher Journaling

After sending out the concept paper and the survey, the researcher could not make further changes to either without compromising the integrity and cohesiveness of the study. However, in the future, some further changes and clarifications would be made to the concept. First, linking suffering caused by Satan only to a response of spiritual warfare was overly simplistic and missed the big picture. The response is not just spiritual warfare, but essentially combatting it with God's opposite. This also includes everyday kindness, serving people, humanitarian aid, and working toward social justice, among many others, which are all forms of warfare in the kingdom. Prayer and charismatic spiritual warfare is just one piece of the required action. Without prayer, action may not be fully effective; however, without action, prayer may lack teeth.

Furthermore, a response merely of repentance and forgiveness to suffering caused by free will is also somewhat simplistic. While these both deal with the heart, there is an action component to this response as well. Seeking restoration, as well as mercy and grace, are also important aspects of responding to this type of suffering. Particularly when it comes to systemic injustice, forgiveness is insufficient without also actively working toward social and restorative justice.

Finally, two important concepts may not have been emphasized sufficiently in the paper. First, the clarification of first degree and second degree causation was added at the

very end, only hours before sending out the paper to the respondents. Upon further reflection, this concept is even more important than what the researcher originally realized, as it allows one to identify the source at a simple level but not become caught up in unproductive and conjectural theological exercises about the theoretical sources of suffering or God's omnipotence. The purpose of considering the source is to determine the response, not necessarily even to answer the question of why something occurred. While it is good that it made it into the released version of the paper, this should be more strongly emphasized and expounded upon during future versions of the essay. Secondly, it should be reemphasized that all of these sources and responses are interrelated, and that most situations will most likely not fall neatly into the matrix, with only one clear source and one simple response. This is particularly true for the relationship between suffering caused by Satan and Free Will: spiritual forces may strongly influence behavior, and in turn, personal behavior impacts spiritual dynamics.

Conclusion

Despite the myriad sources and complexities of suffering experienced around the world, one thing is certain: clarity is only found in relationship with God. During the in-depth interviews, missionaries discussed how much obedience was a factor in suffering; in that disobedience opens oneself up to needless suffering, and if one is obeying God, it is possible to walk in full assurance that God is working in any difficulty that may occur. This obedience is possible through an emotional and spiritual clarity regarding the nature of God, which is facilitated by a history of provision and demonstrations of the faithfulness of God, which provides increased confidence during future trials. Practicing

prayer, worship and disciplines that facilitate encounters with the presence of God filled the missionaries with a restoration of soul and also helped to support the sense of sureness about what God was calling one to and what steps of obedience were asked of them. Finally, a knowledge that the rewards of suffering are real, not only in this life but even more so in eternity, allowed missionaries to risk everything and accept whatever comes their way, knowing that their God, who is good and never wasteful, will use their lives to expand His kingdom and bring His glory to the ends of the earth.

Non-missionaries emphasized the importance of clarity as well, in a different way. In response to the concept paper on the theology of suffering, most expressed that it helped them to increase their understanding of the various sources of suffering, and therefore the corresponding responses. For many of them, the essay helped solidify their views and they expected that it will help them to have more confidence in knowing not only how to respond to suffering as it arises in the future, but also how to explain suffering to those around them who may be going through trials or difficulties.

APPENDIX A

CONCEPT PAPER ON THE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Understanding Suffering: A Theological Framework For Walking through Difficult Times

By Azure Maset
November 2016

I. Introduction

A good and balanced theology shows an appreciation for divine mystery, and holds truth in the tension between opposites. As Dr. Paul King once wrote, “Truth has two wings... The nature of truth is elliptical, that is, truth tends to revolve around distinct polarities... Neither pole possesses the totality of truth. Rather, a divinely-designed dynamic tension exists between the two focal points.”¹ Another analogy would be that truth requires two legs in order to walk in balance.

Examples of holding truth in tension can be seen in many areas of Christian theology. God is both just and merciful. He is the awesome Almighty who explosively created galaxies and black holes, while at the same time He is our Abba (“Daddy”) Father. We have been justified by faith, but yet still go through a process of growing in sanctification which is manifested in our works and accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is here now and everything that Christ’s blood has ransomed is available to us, but yet we still await its full manifestation. Just as these are all truths held in the tension between opposites, it is the same way with suffering.

Since suffering is such a subjective experience –what causes me to suffer may not be a big deal for you, and vice versa– I’ve been careful not to limit this framework to any particular type of suffering. As a working definition, I’d like to use the nuanced and sufficiently vague description provided by Joseph Kirzone: “[Suffering is] an unpleasant feeling caused by an emotional, psychological, or physical experience that disturbs our well-being and our peace of mind, and causes great discomfort.”²

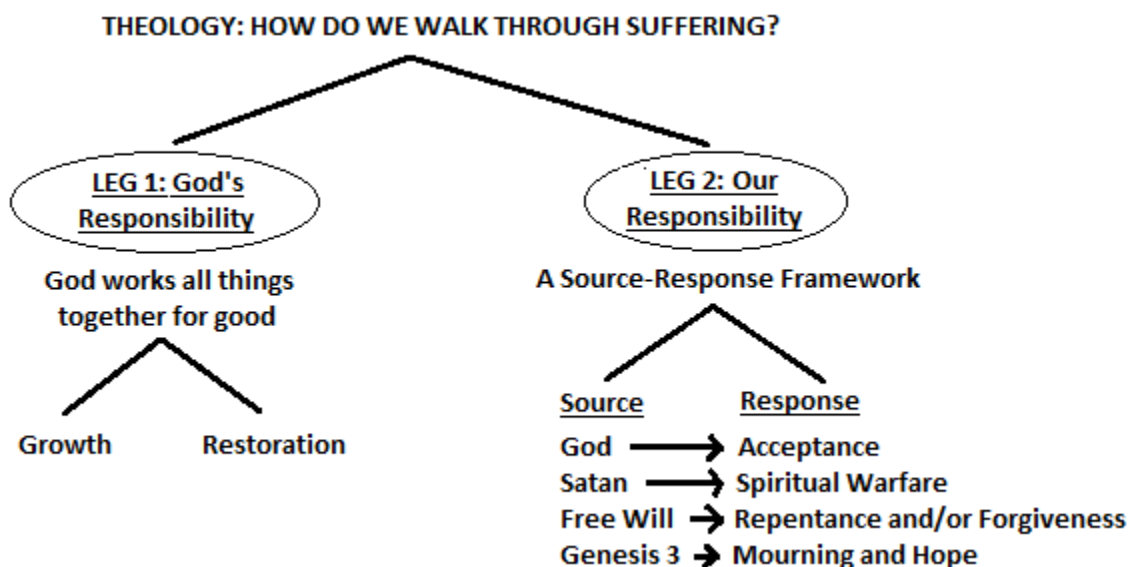
Below I’d like to share with you what I believe are the two legs of a balanced theology of suffering. Particularly, while it may never be answered fully, I’d like to provide some thoughts about the following question: How do we walk through suffering and find hope, peace and joy rather than confusion and despair?

You’ll see both legs of this framework are true, and at one time in life I would have thought either would constitute a complete theology. On one hand, it is only God who can instill joy and peace during difficult seasons. Yet on the other hand, the way we think

¹ <https://kingsroundtable.wordpress.com/2013/11/13/truth-has-two-wings/>

² Joseph F. Kirzone, *The End of Suffering*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 3.

about and respond to suffering also makes a big difference. I believe that affirming one leg without also affirming the other is imbalanced and can lead to significant confusion and further pain. Before moving on to discuss the characteristics of the two legs, below is a summary graphic of the entire picture:



II. LEG 1. God's Responsibility: God works all things together for good for those who love Him

The first leg of a theology of suffering is simply that no matter how dire or tragic a situation may be, whether we caused it ourselves or it was thrust upon us, “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28 NASB). Sometimes this is indeed all we need to know when walking through a difficulty. Our Father, who loves us so much that He would come to earth, experience the trials and pressures of a human life and then die on a cross so that we could experience freedom from bondage, has everything under control.

So, on the one hand, suffering is simple. Whether something was willed or allowed by God (and regardless of whether there is even a difference between these two), it is exceedingly wonderful that God can use *everything* for good if we ask Him to. That’s it. We can go to Him and trust that He will make things right. Nothing and no one is beyond the reach of our Savior.

The way God uses suffering is manifest in two distinct areas: internal character and external circumstance. Both are a work of supernatural grace.

A. Personal Growth

It seems nothing is able to develop strength of character and personhood quite like suffering. Upon meeting someone who displays a depth of heart, a solidness of soul, and a deep abiding joy that is unaffected by circumstance, I've almost come to expect that they've probably walked through some heavy seasons in their life. In fact I can't think of a time when I've learned of someone's story and this expectation has not been confirmed. It almost seems to be a rare person these days that runs to our Father in times of confusion or difficulty, but oh, those who do are so beautiful! I believe that the faith traditions which have embraced suffering as an important part of the Christian life have really grasped the revelation that suffering makes us more like Christ. Any discourse about suffering cannot be complete without strongly affirming its unique value in changing and growing us as we live this human life.

Yet not everyone who walks through suffering comes out refined. It is not something we can do in ourselves; it is only found through an active work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. For as many people who have let suffering grow them, perhaps more have become bitter and wounded. It is not inherent in walking through difficulty that we become better people - it only comes through bringing our trials to the Lord, surrendering our own desires, and asking Him to grow these characteristics within us.

B. Restoration and Impact

Just as God works within us, He also works around us to bring restoration. As Bishop Joseph Garlington once observed, only God can unscramble eggs, and indeed sometimes scrambled eggs is the only apt metaphor for how irreversible and hopeless some situations may seem to be. Yet nothing is beyond our Father's ability to mend, and as we bring broken circumstances to Him, He works actively to make the situation right again. The way God does this is a work of mystery, trust and often patience. His resolution may not look like what we had originally envisioned, but it will always be good.

Other times, particularly when we are suffering for the sake of the gospel, God isn't necessarily restoring the situation but using our suffering to advance His kingdom. The end result of sacrifice may not even be seen within our lifetime, but He always uses it. Throughout church history, it is common for significant amount of people to come to know Jesus after (and I would argue through) the martyrdom of a group of saints. The Apostle Paul, arguably one of the godliest men to ever have walked the earth, wrote of his situation:

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake... we are without honor. To this present hour we are

both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. (1 Corinthians 4: 9-13, NASB)

In that moment the Apostles may have looked like fools to the Corinthian church. They may not have ever known the results of their efforts, but it was through their sacrifice that God made known the work of Christ and ultimately changed the world forever.

C. Issues Related to God's Sovereignty

Before moving forward, this brings us to a long-held discussion about God's sovereignty and His role in the evil and pain that exists in this world. While minority and fringe views have always existed, the majority of mainstream theologians throughout church history have emphasized God's omnipotence, which is His ultimate power to control every detail of the universe, including suffering. This theology is evident in the commonly held belief that God must have a plan for seemingly disastrous events, even though we may never fully understand what that is until we meet Him in heaven one day. In fact, the idea that God brings suffering into our lives for a reason (often in order to grow and refine us into the likeness of Christ) is the theology I've come across most often in researching for this project.

God is, of course, sovereign and omnipotent and as discussed above He uses suffering in significant ways both in and through our lives. However, when God's plan is used as a justification for suffering, and particularly if applying it to every circumstance, it is incomplete and can cause some damaging misconceptions about the nature of God. So many honest and sincere believers—including myself for many years—have been angry at God at one time or another and I believe this is due, at least in part, to this theology of sovereignty. Jurgen Moltmann, a Protestant theologian who lived in Germany during World War II, considered suffering to be the rock of atheism, in that the suffering of innocent people radically challenges the concept of a just and loving God. Sadly, it often seems to be those with the softest heart for the broken and afflicted that may walk away from a loving God due to their understanding of His role, or lack of role, in the midst of tragedy.

The idea that God orchestrates all suffering in order to make us into better people—or for some other cosmic good which is presently unknown to us—quickly breaks down in the face of the extreme situations that occur daily around the world. It may break down in your own life, as well. Consider, for example, the fact that every year six million children die before their fifth birthday, many from preventable diseases such as malnutrition and

diarrhea.³ Hundreds of thousands of children have been abducted, abused, and brainwashed into serving as child soldiers in armed conflicts; sometimes they are even forced to attack their own villages and families.⁴ Should this be embraced as God's good plan for their lives? Heaven forbid!!

I believe we confuse God *using* all things for good with God *intending* all things for good. God is in the business of taking broken circumstances and weaving them together so beautifully that in the end it is better than it ever began. This end result can turn out to be so perfect that it would be easy to confuse this for His original design. Still, this does not mean He necessarily sent that difficulty in the first place. This may seem like an insignificant nuance, but the implications are real in its application, and particularly in our response to that suffering: If God designed every event that occurs in my life, and He is good, then who am I to dare resist it? Why would I ever want to pray against something that God is doing? The confusion caused by these questions can be paralyzing and lead us into a place of inaction when confronted with troubles. This brings us to Leg 2 of the framework.

II. LEG 2. Our Responsibility: A Source-Response Framework

As seen above, the ability to walk through suffering is a grace given to us by our Father. God can indeed work all things together for good, regardless of the source (which is particularly comforting in times when I am the source of my own problems!). At the same time, however, we have a role and responsibility to participate with God in our response to suffering, and I believe that this response is directly linked to the source of that suffering. In a way, this is similar to the tension held between justification and sanctification in that it is a work of both faith and action. As part of Leg 2, I'll be describing a framework for discerning both the source and corresponding response for any situation that may be perceived as a suffering.

I've often heard it said that identifying the source of suffering does not matter, and that asking "why" will only lead to frustration and confusion. Sometimes asking why is even seen as some sort of Pandora's Box of doubt that, once opened, will ruin our hearts and our faith irreparably. This is true in that pondering the source of suffering can lead us down some very unproductive roads. If we think too much about the sources that may be behind a more apparent source –essentially looking two steps up the causal chain– things quickly get confusing: for example, since Satan asked God for permission to afflict Job, was it ultimately God or Satan who was responsible? Yet if we look only one step up the causal chain, it was obviously Satan who was actively working to cause those terrible

³ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>

⁴ <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/effects-of-conflict/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/>

events in Job's life. I believe that it is wisdom for us to look at one step up the causal chain, but needlessly confusing and unproductive to go any further than that.

The reason it is good for us to identify the cause of suffering, at least at the first degree, is that it affects our response. Our response, then, directly impacts the outcome of the experience. Perhaps more importantly, it preserves our relationship with God and perception of His nature. The problem that occurs when we don't consciously ask the question about why we suffer is that we end up operating out of our most familiar default (and perhaps unconscious) understanding, which may or may not be what's actually going on in that circumstance.

For example, in the western world we often look to scientific answers: if my child becomes ill, I take them to a physician who will prescribe a medical treatment. In many places around the world, however, they may interpret this same illness through a spiritual lens rather than a scientific lens, and bring their child to a shaman instead of a physician. In this example our understanding of the source of that sickness (whether it was an inherently physical or spiritual issue) determined our response (whether we brought our child to a medical doctor or a shaman) and in turn our actions may directly impact whether that child's health improves. So, what if our assumptions are wrong? An unexamined mindset can cause us to come to a faulty diagnosis and respond in an inappropriate way.

Many theologians have sought to apply the same definition –the same diagnosis, if you will– to every situation, and I believe this is where we fall short. While reading and praying through various theological reflections on this issue, four underlying sources of suffering seemed to emerge: (A) God, (B) Satan, (C) Free Will and (D) Genesis 3. Each of these sources, in turn, elicits a unique response.

I believe that Leg 2 of a comprehensive theology of suffering must consider all four of these sources and their corresponding responses. Disregarding or misdiagnosing any one of them can have harmful effects and heap greater suffering on an already difficult circumstance. We've all seen this in one form or another. The presumably well intentioned conclusions of Job's friends about his predicament only served to complicate and frustrate. Even today, some dear saints have been accused of having sinned to cause their own sickness, which adds guilt and confusion to an already difficult situation. Other times, as mentioned under the discussion of God's sovereignty, situations that cause deep pain may be attributed to the will of God and subsequently cloud a believer's perception of His goodness and love. We can never look at someone else's circumstance and make a judgment about what is going on, as doing so only causes greater shame or confusion.

Below is a description of the unique characteristics for each of these four sources of suffering, as well as their corresponding response. In describing these sources I tried not

to be too specific in order to avoid making any rules or blanket statements. If we pray to our loving Father and ask Him for insight, He will give us discernment about which one of these sources is in operation in a given circumstance, and provide us with clarity and wisdom regarding how to respond.

A. Diagnosis: God is the Source

Let's be clear about this: God does not knock the wind out of our sails to make us stronger and more resilient. I also don't believe He sends suffering in order to punish us for our sins. To the contrary, He sent His Son to die for us so that we can be free from the bondage and pain of our mistakes, missteps, poor choices and wicked hearts. It's taken me some years to fully grasp this, but the gospel really is good news!

Still, God is behind one type of suffering: the inner struggle in our hearts and minds that we experience when accepting that God's will for our lives may be different than the plans we had in mind. So many times throughout the Bible, and in our lives, when God calls us to do something, it initiates a season of testing, purging and surrender. Joseph went to prison before the palace, and Abraham waited for decades for God to fulfill His promise of giving him a son. This may not always sound like a legitimate form of suffering, but it can be really hard. It can be crushing when we end up in a place that is far from that which we had hoped. Yet in the end, how many of us are glad that something we wanted so badly didn't work out? How many of us are glad that we waited and trusted God to fulfill His promises in our lives? He knows better than we do, and it is through these times that we truly learn about His goodness and faithfulness.

Our Response: Acceptance

God's nature and everything He does is good. If we determine God is the source of our situation, resisting what He is doing would not be wise. We should embrace and fully digest what God is placing in our lives, as difficult as that may be in some cases. Don't fight it, and most importantly, don't be confused by it. Allowing God to have His way will produce the results that He is after. When all is said and done, we will be so pleased with the person we've become and where God has brought us that, even though we may not want to go through it again, the character and wisdom it produces in our lives is priceless. This refinement, valuable to both God and others and more precious than gold, will remain with us for the rest of our lives.

A unique aspect of this type of suffering is that once we come to a place of accepting His will, the most difficult part of that suffering is relieved. He fills us with peace and allows us to view things as He does, even though the circumstances may still be uncomfortable, unwanted and difficult. We may find that once we release our tight grasp on our own wants or reputation, we can see and perhaps even rejoice in what God is doing in our

lives. It may be a hard road at times, but the results of doing life God's way will surpass anything we could dream for ourselves.

B. Diagnosis: Satan is the Source

The Bible is clear about the fact that we have an enemy who works against the purposes of God in our lives. 1 Peter 5:8-9 admonishes believers to "be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, be firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." Jeffrey Russell's description of evil provides an apt picture of what this form of suffering feels like: "Evil destroys and it does not build; it rips and it does not mend; it cuts and it does not bind. It strives always and everywhere to annihilate, to turn to nothing. To take all being and render it nothing is the heart of evil."⁵ This is consistent Jesus' assertion that "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NASB).

In order for us to discern the source of a particular form of suffering, we need to clearly understand who God is and who our enemy is so that we can distinguish between them. Anything which would be consistent with the devil's nature cannot and should not be considered part of God's will. God brings life; the devil brings death. If something in our lives feels vile, sinister, twisted or dark, it is *not* the work of our Lord.

This source of suffering is frequently experienced when we are making advances for the kingdom of God. Dark spiritual forces are real (see Ephesians 6) and in this world there is both a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness. It is common for believers to experience a sort of "pushback" when bringing light to dark areas. Denying or disregarding the reality of the spirit realm leaves us ill-equipped to deal with it effectively. When experiencing suffering that comes from the enemy, we should not confuse this for something that God is behind.

Our Response: Spiritual Warfare

If something comes from the enemy, we can be confident that it is not God's plan and it is not something we need to accept in our lives. While we would not fight something that God is behind, we should absolutely resist everything which is meant to steal, kill and destroy. We should not embrace anything coming from the accuser as that which comes from God. Instead, we engage in spiritual warfare to partner with God in these situations. We have authority to resist and overcome any schemes from the evil one. Knowing that our loving and almighty God is on our side and that we are assured victory allows us to

⁵ Jeffrey Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 23.

walk with grace, peace and strength through those times of suffering which come from Satan.

C. Diagnosis: Free Will is the Source

We only need to reflect on our own lives for a moment to realize that in some cases, suffering can result from the pain and brokenness caused by poor choices made by us or others. This form of suffering is not something God planned for us, nor can we hide behind the old adage, “the devil made me do it.” We have all been given free will, and sometimes this freedom is used in a way that hurts ourselves and others. While it is possible that spiritual forces may influence behavior (the second step up the causal chain), we are all still responsible for our actions.

Perhaps the majority of suffering that has occurred on the face of the earth is caused by people. Suffering brought about by our own actions or mistakes may seem categorically different than that suffered at the hands of another, but at the core it’s the same: it’s all a result of free will. Sometimes the web of offense and victimhood is so complex that it can be almost impossible to identify where it all began. Dr. Andrew Park uses the Korean word *han* to describe the effects that long term individual or systemic abuse has on one’s soul: “Han is the rupture of the soul caused by abuse, exploitation, injustice and violence. When the soul is hurt so much, it bursts symbolically; it aches... The wound produced by such repeated abuse and injustice is han in the depths of the soul.”⁶

Christ has also experienced and overcome this form of suffering. In as much as Jesus suffered *for* us, He also suffered *like* us and can truly look at us and say, “I understand.” He understands the pain, the betrayal, the injustice. Even as He hung on the cross looking at the faces of His persecutors, He prayed, “Dear Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Our Response: Repentance and/or Forgiveness

Our response to suffering which is caused by free will depends on whether it was self-inflicted or caused by someone else. If it’s something due to our own actions or sin, our response should be an attitude of repentance. So many times we may try to hide our struggles from God and others out of guilt or pride, but this only provides more opportunity for it to grow within us. Bringing our mistakes to God allows Him to cleanse us and to give us guidance and wisdom as to how the situation can be made right. For me, God’s goodness has never been more evident than in seeing how He’s used what I

⁶ Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 11-12.

thought were failures, mistakes, or just plain weaknesses and woven them together in a way I never would have thought possible.

If the source of suffering is due to another person's actions, we cannot find restoration without forgiveness. As Christ prayed this in the midst of His ultimate rejection and injustice, we are called to follow suit in offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us, whether it be seven times or seventy times seven (Matthew 5:44-45). Our pain may be so deep that this seems impossible, but God can empower and enable us to do so. Without forgiveness, we are held in bondage long after the initial offense has passed, and when we release our pain through forgiveness, we find freedom. We can forgive because we ourselves are forgiven.

D. Diagnosis: Genesis 3 is the Source

It is clear in the book of Genesis that God designed the world to be perfect. Eden was a beautiful paradise, the shadow of which still exists as a seed of longing in each of our hearts. When Adam and Eve partook of the knowledge of good and evil, Genesis 3 describes the way struggle and imminent death were introduced into the world: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, for from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3: 17b-19 NASB). The entire created world, including humankind and even the earth itself continued to experience this pain. Obstacles, toil, hardship, and ultimately death were all introduced at the fall.

We are not living in the Garden of Eden, and the reality of this is painful and heartbreaking. At some point, we all go through the process of growing older and dying, whether we have lived "good" or "bad" lives (if one can even make that distinction at all), and this is certainly a suffering. While Scripture contains examples of spiritual forces causing natural events, certainly not every storm is spiritual. Typhoons and earthquake ravage the world and leave mass destruction in their wake. They are not necessarily caused by an individual's sinfulness or a spiritual attack; sometimes, a broken earth rages and causes suffering.

Our Response: Mourning and Hope

When suffering of this type occurs, it is not something for us to embrace as we would God's will; neither is it something to fight against as an issue of spiritual warfare, nor to repent of as an issue of sin. In these cases, we mourn during these tragedies and look for God to bring restoration, keeping in mind that the ultimate restoration is in eternity. While tragedies are real and God cares about our suffering in the present moment, we must not forget that while we live on this earth, any solution is a temporary solution.

Ultimately, whether life is smooth or tragic, long or short, our true home is in eternity. If we focus too much on our current condition, we can forget that we were not made for this world.⁷ One day there will be no more tears or sorrow, and we will worship Him in full revelation of His glory. Until that day, we praise Him in times of sorrow and grief, and long for the day when His majesty is revealed and Christ returns to bring final restoration and resurrection.

III. Conclusion

I'd like to conclude this essay with an example from Scripture to examine how this framework can be applied. Pastor Bill Johnson once compared Jonah's storm (described in Jonah 1) to the storm experienced by Jesus' disciples on the Sea of Galilee (described in Matthew 8, Mark 4 and Luke 8). "Which storm would you prefer," he asked, "the one caused by our own disobedience or the one sent by God?" In this case, I would ask, what if the disciples responded to their storm in the same way as Jonah? "Oh! We know this one! We've read the story of Jonah. Someone on this boat must have sinned. Who is it? Let us throw you overboard to stop the storm!" This response would have seemed absurd. Instead, they woke Jesus and He calmed the wind and waves. "Where is your faith?" Jesus asked them. This storm was testing their faith, not helping them turn from disobedience. These two storms may have appeared to be similar, but the source and response was different in each case (Leg 2).

Still, in both of these cases, God was able to use the storms to display His glory and goodness (Leg 1). For the disciples, it was in this storm that they first realized Jesus was the Son of God. Had it not occurred, they would never have wondered, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matthew 8:27, NASB). For Jonah, God still used the storm, even though it was caused by his disobedience. When Jonah repented, God not only restored Jonah but was also able to reach the other sailors on the boat, who would never have known Him otherwise. Jonah 1:5 explains that when the storm first began, the sailors were afraid and each one "cried to his [own] god." After experiencing the power of God to cease the storm from its raging, verse 16 says that they "feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (NASB).

With all of this said, in closing I'd like to affirm that there are no hard and fast rules. In the book of Revelation, the following message is given to the church in Smyrna: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you in prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto

⁷ In fact, beyond finding hope in suffering, I believe that a revelation of eternity is why a martyr can go willingly—even rejoicing—to their death. They know that our lives are a wisp, a brief sojourn through this temporal planet, and that the reality of heaven is greater than the reality of this earth.

death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10, NASB). God warned the church that they would experience this intense trial for ten days, and that the source of it is Satan. Yet His instruction to them was not to pray against it and engage in spiritual warfare, but to be faithful and endure, even unto death. While I hope this framework is helpful as a guide, it is still important to ask God for clarity and wisdom in each specific case.

By embracing both Leg 1 and Leg 2, we can find greater certainty in knowing how to respond to times of suffering, with full trust that He can and will use everything for good. Furthermore, we will be clear on who God is and how we can participate with Him in bringing about growth and restoration. Suffering is undoubtedly a confusing phenomenon, and I hope that this framework helps you in finding clarity, strength, peace and hope in troubling times.

APPENDIX B
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

FEEDBACK ON THE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Page 1: Welcome to My Survey

Hello and welcome!

Thank you so much for engaging with me in my DMin project. If you've reached this point, you've likely read my essay which describes a practical theology of suffering and answers the question: How do we walk through suffering and find hope, peace and joy rather than confusion and despair?

I would love to hear your thoughts about it. The survey/short answer format seemed the easiest way to collect feedback from a larger group of people, but I'd love to talk with you one-on-one if you'd like to have a more in-depth discussion. It contains 10 multiple choice and/or short answer questions. Even just a sentence or two would be helpful in response to the short essay questions, though longer is welcome.

I appreciate your time, interest and feedback.

Love,
Azure

Page 2: Personal Background

First, I'd like to hear a little bit about your personal background and denomination:

1. I am a:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

2. Age category:

- ☐ 29 and under
- ☐ 30-45
- ☐ 46-60
- ☐ 61 and above

3. Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If Yes, what is your denomination? If No, what is your religion (includes atheist and agnostic)?

4. Do you consider yourself to be charismatic (defined as a belief that the modern day church should function in the gifts of the Spirit as identified in 1 Corinthians 12)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not familiar with this belief

Space below for additional clarification, if needed

Page 3: Theological Aspects of the Framework

The next set of questions is designed to explore whether you agree or disagree with the framework.

5. Have you thought about the theology or meaning or suffering before reading this essay?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Space below for additional clarification, if needed

6. If Yes, is this framework consistent with your views? Why or why not?

7. If No, what are your general thoughts on this framework? Does it seem like something you agree with?

8. Has reading this framework changed your views in any way?

Page 4: Practical Aspects of the Framework

Lastly, I'd like to hear whether you felt reading this framework was useful for you in your everyday life. Please feel free to answer honestly, I won't take any offense! ☺

9. In general, do you think it's helpful or unnecessary to think about the theology of suffering? Why or why not?

10. Having read this framework, do you think it will be practical and helpful for you in the future when you encounter times of suffering? Why or why not?

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